Activation Energy Depending on the Thickness of the Ferromagnetic Layer

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Abstract We present the detailed study of activation energy $E_a$ according to the thickness of the magnetic layer ($t_{CC} = 0.7, 0.8$ and $1 \text{nm}$). The study was carried out at room temperature by means of polar magneto-optical Kerr effect magnetometry (PMOKE) using a He–Ne laser ($\lambda = 633 \text{nm}$). We found that the activation field $\mu_0H_a$, the coercive field $\mu_0H_c$ and the average activation energy $E_a$ are weak for the sample with thickness $t_{CC} = 1 \text{nm}$.

Keywords: time of demagnetization, activation field, activation energy, activation volume


1. Introduction

The miniaturization of the devices using ferromagnetic materials made grow the interest for these materials during these last decades for the researchers. Research on these materials is directed either towards the comprehension of very fundamental mechanisms or towards an important prospects for applications such as ultra-high density storage [1,2]. Indeed, the writing of the elementary bits of information is traditionally done by application of an impulsion of magnetic field. Thus the magnetization reversal dynamic plays a fundamental role in the creation of these elementary bits of information. Energy necessary to create a first reversed magnetic field is called activation energy. A perfect control of the parameters controlling the activation energy would make it possible to control the electric current necessary for the creation of the elementary bits of information.

Some work has been devoted to the energy of activation [3,4,5] but these works did not discuss the effect the thickness of the magnetic layer on energy of activation.

The aim of this paper is to show that the thickness of the magnetic layer can influence the value of the activation energy.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Sample and Structural Characterizations

Si(100) substrate is beforehand cleaned by ultrasounds in an acetone bath. After the cleaning, this substrates is thermally oxidized in a furnace at 1200°C during 2 hours. This time is sufficient for the formation of an oxide layer on the silicon surface substrate.

**Figure 1.** (a): XRD spectra of a 25 nm thick Au layers deposited on SiO$_2$ substrate. (b): 2D AFM image of a 25 nm thick Au buffer layer deposited on SiO$_2$ substrate.
Au/Co/Au films were prepared by electron beam evaporation in an ultrahigh vacuum chamber, with a base pressure about of $10^{-5}$ Torr and approximately $10^{5}$ Torr during deposition on SiO$_2$ at room temperature.

A first 25 nm thick Au film is deposited on the substrate at a deposition rate of 2.5 nm/min, as calibrated with a quartz microbalance, followed by annealing at 423 K during 1 h to reduce the surface roughness.

The Au film is (111) textured, as shown by X-ray diffraction (Figure 1(a)). Figure 1(b) shows the 2D AFM image of the Au buffer layer after annealing. The surface roughness (root mean square: rms) was measured to be about 0.2 nm. Using the surface corrugation obtained from 2D AFM, we estimate a lateral grain size of 40–60 nm. Cobalt layers with thicknesses ($t_{Co}$) equal to 1.0, 0.8 and 0.7 nm are then deposited on the Au/SiO$_2$ at a deposition rate of 0.2 nm/min. Finally, a second Au layer with a thickness about of 5 nm is deposited on top of the cobalt layers.

The (111) texture of the Au buffer layer suggests, in each case, a possible epitaxial growth of the cobalt layer with the Hexagonal Close-Packed (0001) structure [6,7,8].

2.2. Magnetic investigations

Magnetic hysteresis loops, at a field sweep rate of $d\mu_0H/dt = 1.2$ mT, were recorded at room temperature (RT) by polar magneto-optical Kerr effect magnetometry (PMOKE) using a He–Ne laser ($\lambda = 633$ nm). On the hysteresis loops we measured the coercive fields ($H_C$) using a He–Ne laser ($\lambda = 633$ nm). On the hysteresis loops we measured the coercive fields ($H_C$) equal to 1, 0.8 and 0.7 nm and are then deposited on the Au/SiO$_2$ at a deposition rate of 0.2 nm/min. Finally, a second Au layer with a thickness about of 5 nm is deposited on top of the cobalt layers.

The (111) texture of the Au buffer layer suggests, in each case, a possible epitaxial growth of the cobalt layer with the Hexagonal Close-Packed (0001) structure [6,7,8].

2.3. Magnetization Reversal

The energy needed to reverse magnetization can be expressed in the following way [3,4]:

$$ W(H) = E_a - \mu_0 M_S V_B H, $$

where $E_a$ is an activation energy at zero field i.e. thermal energy required to initiate the magnetization reversal in the absence of the field, $M_S$ is the saturation magnetization and $V_B$ is the Barkhausen volume (the magnetization volume that reverses during a single activation event). In this context, the time $t_{1/2}$ so that a sample is demagnetized, under the applied field $\mu_0 H$, should follow the Arrhenius-Néel law:

$$ t_{1/2} = t_0 \exp \left( \frac{E_a - M_S V_B (\mu_0 H)}{K_B T} \right). $$

We recorded the reduced magnetization reversal curves $m(t)$ in time. From magnetization reversal curves $m(t)$ vs $t$ we deduced $t_{1/2}$ vs $\mu_0 H$. The fit of $t_{1/2}$ vs $\mu_0 H$ by using equation (2) allowed us to determine $E_a$ and $M_S V_B$. On Figure 2 are represented $t_{1/2}$ vs $\mu_0 H$ and their fitting.

The experimental dots of Figure 2 show that $t_{1/2}$ evolves under the Arrhenius law. The adjustments of these experimental dots by Eq. (2) gives the values of $t_0$, $E_a$ and $M_S V_B$.

3. Results and Discussions

On Figure 2, we notice in the three cases that there is an agreement between the adjustment curve and the experimental dots. In Table 2 are summarized the values of $t_0$, $E_a$ and $M_S V_B$. For the three samples $t_0$ is $10^4$ s, what mean that this parameter does not vary too much according to the thickness of the magnetic layer. The value of $t_0$ is the same magnitude order we found on (Pt/Co)$_3$ multilayers [5].

Table 2. Data obtained from the fitting by Arrhenius-Néel law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$t_{Co}$(nm)</th>
<th>0.7</th>
<th>0.8</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\mu_0 H_C$(mT)</td>
<td>31.60</td>
<td>29.20</td>
<td>26.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\mu_0 H_C$(mT)</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. $t_{1/2}$ depending on $\mu_0 H$ and H fitting by Arrhenius-Néel law Eq. (2), for the three samples.

The values of $E_a$, in Table 2, are in general weak compared to that we found on our (Pt/Co)$_3$ multilayers [5]. $E_a$ in magnetic layer having 0.8 nm thickness is twice higher than those of the magnetic layers having thicknesses $t_{Co} = 1$ nm and 0.7 nm. The highest value of the activation energy found in this sample ($t_{Co} = 0.8$ nm) let’s think that this sample would have more defects than the two others. This sample has also the highest value of $M_S V_B$. If we omit the assumption that the magnetization saturation $M_S$ is almost of the same magnitude order for the three samples [6] then the greatest value of $V_B$ would be in the magnetic layer of 0.8 nm thickness. This lets think that reversed initial volumes would be larger than those of the two other samples. Thus, magnetization reversal in this sample would be done by a mode different from that of the two other samples. In the samples of thickness $t_{Co} = 1$ nm and 0.7 nm, the weakness of the
values of activation energy $E_a$ lets think about the magnetization reversal dynamics dominated by the magnetic domain wall motion. These deductions are in agreement with our previous works \cite{5} where we showed that the activation volume and the activation energy are highs when magnetization reverse mainly by several nucleate centers due to the inhomogeneities.

Knowing $t_0$ and $E_a$ for each sample, it is possible to estimate these times of demagnetization in zero field but under the temperature effect only at 300 K. In fact, Eq. (2) at zero field become:

$$t_{1/2}(\mu_0 H = 0) = t_0 \exp \left( \frac{E_a}{K_B T} \right). \quad (3)$$

We found respectively $t_{1/2}(\mu_0 H = 0) = 2.85 \times 10^6$ s, $3.41 \times 10^6$ s and $2.11 \times 10^6$ s for $t_{Co} = 0.7$ nm, 0.8 nm and 1 nm.

$W(H) = 0$ for $\mu_0 H = \mu_0 H_a$, where $\mu_0 H_a$ is the activation field that cancels the energy barrier. Under these conditions the activation energy is given by:

$$E_a = \mu_0 M_S V_B H_a. \quad (4)$$

By taking into account the values of $M_S V_B$ found in Table 2, Eq. (4) gives respectively $\mu_0 H_a = 10.93$ mT, $\mu_0 H_a = 13.03$ mT and $\mu_0 H_a = 7.43$ mT for the samples with $t_{Co} = 0.7$ nm, 0.8 nm and 1 nm. In the three cases the value of $\mu_0 H_a$ is lower than that of $\mu_0 H_C$ what shows clearly that the magnetization reversal is well initiated before the sample is demagnetized. The lowest value of $\mu_0 H_a$ is found for the sample $t_{Co}$ with $= 1$ nm. The lowest values of $\mu_0 H_a$ and $\mu_0 H_C$ found for this sample shows that the reversal of its magnetization would not require enough of electrical energy.

**4. Conclusion**

We studied ultrathin cobalt films with thickness $t_{Co} = 0.7$, 0.8 and 1 nm. We extracted for these three samples the average activation energy $E_a$ in zero field. $E_a$ does not vary linearly according to the thickness of the magnetic layer. We found that the activation field $\mu_0 H_a$, the coercive field $\mu_0 H_C$ and the average activation energy $E_a$ are weak for the sample with thickness $t_{Co} = 1$ nm. This result shown that with this thickness one can reverse magnetization with a low electrical energy.

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**References**


