Toward Ultra-fast and Ultra-low Power Switching in Perpendicular Magnetic Tunnel Junctions

Daniel B. Gopman
Materials Science & Engineering Division
National Institute of Standards and Technology
Gaithersburg, MD 20899, USA
daniel.gopman@nist.gov

William Taylor
GLOBALFOUNDRIES
Malta, NY 12020, USA

Weigang Wang
Department of Physics
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

Jian-Ping Wang
Tony Low
Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN, USA

Abstract— **Magnetic random access memory (MRAM) based on perpendicular magnetic tunnel junctions (pMTJs) is one of the core building blocks for beyond-CMOS technologies. Their inherent non-volatility, rad-hardness and endurance (10^{16}) makes pMTJs extremely competitive for computation-in-memory and other DoD applications where security and ruggedness are of the utmost vitality. To deliver on the potential of MRAM for computation-in-memory, reductions in the energy- and delay characteristics of pMTJs must be demonstrated. Based on interfacial- and bulk perpendicular magnetic anisotropy materials, we demonstrate two novel perpendicular synthetic antiferromagnet (p-SAF) designs for ultra-fast and ultra-low power switching performance: one using interfacial PMA materials and one using bulk PMA materials. Our stacks are compatible with or close to the existing p-MTJ stack and fabrication process, which will make the technology transition to back-end-of-line semiconductor process practical within a 5-10 year time frame.**

Keywords—MRAM; beyond-CMOS; spintronics; rad-hard

I. INTRODUCTION (*HEADING 1*)

The Magnetic Tunnel Junction (MTJ) is one of the core building blocks for beyond-CMOS technologies. Compared to other beyond-CMOS building blocks, MTJs offer several unique advantages. Two factors stand out for their ability to enable computation-in-memory and other DoD applications. The first is the inherent non-volatility of the data storage layers, yielding essential radiation hardness, instant power-on, non-destructive data read-out, and security in hardware. And the second, is endurance up to 10^{16} read/write cycles and above, which is three orders of magnitude better than any reported memory cells. This provides necessary robustness for a true computation-in-memory and computation-near-memory arrays.

Advancement of MTJs in the past decade has led to successful magnetic random-access memory (MRAM) products, including toggle-MRAM (Everspin, IBM, Honeywell) and STT-MRAM (Everspin, GLOBALFOUNDRIES). It is realized by the community that MTJs may be the most promising building block for true computation in random access memory (CRAM) because of its superior endurance performance that is needed for computation [1-3]. State of the art performance metrics for the best performing p-MTJs have been demonstrated recently: ultrahigh TMR (208%) in p-MTJs with interfacial perpendicular magnetic anisotropy (PMA) and the ultralow write delays (t_{SW} ~ 165 ps at 50% switching probability) [4-5]. To enable true CRAM, as shown in Fig. 1, industry needs higher TMR ratio (>500%) and much lower write delay (<50 ps) with reasonably low operation energy (E_{SW} ~50 aJ per write operation, read is already negligibly low) and high thermal stability (delta = 60 k_BT). These numbers are from the preliminary benchmarking effort for CRAM. In theory, the highest TMR for a MgO-barrier based MTJ could reach

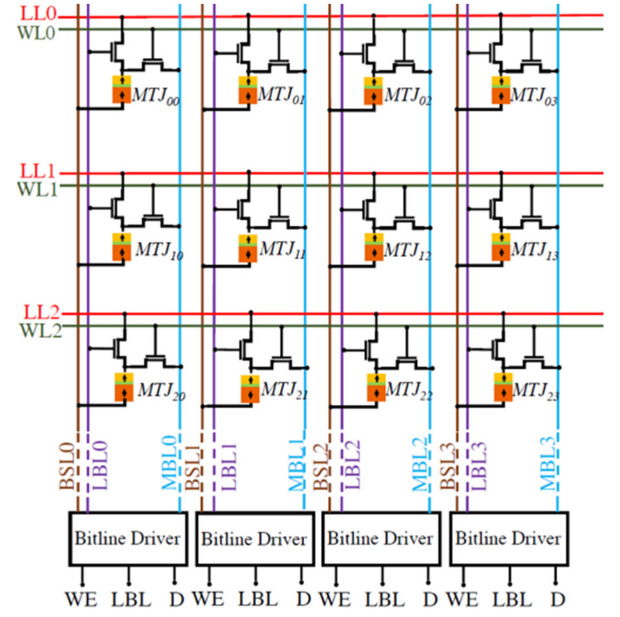

FIGURE 1: MRAM-based CRAM. LL, WL, BSL, LBL and MLM = Logic Line, Word Line, Bit Select Line, Logic Bit Line and Memory Bit Line

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35,000% with right materials and interfaces ,and the write delay could be reduced to below 10 ps with optimized materials and switching mechanisms. Our approach seeks to advance MTJs toward these performance specifications so that CRAM topology, many other new computing topologies, and future high-density MRAM products can become a reality.

An MTJ with engineered perpendicular magnetic anisotropy (PMA) relative to the planes of the layered heterostructure, or pMTJ, is an essential building block for advanced MTJs. The PMA materials are promising candidates for the development of ultra-high-density spintronic memory and logic devices due to their high thermal stability, scalability, and ultra-low power consumption. Interfacial PMA materials such as the Ta/CoFeB/MgO stack possess a PMA (K_u) of ~2-5 Merg/cm^3 and a α of ~0.015-0.027 [6-8]. Considerable progress has been made in the application of interfacial PMA materials to STT-MRAM [9-11]. Bulk PMA materials such as L1$_0$-FePd [12-16] and Mn-based perpendicular Heusler alloys [17-20] have a large K_u (1.3-1.4 MJ/m^3), a low α (0.002~0.015), and a low processing temperature (200 °C). These properties make them ideal for ultra-high density and ultra-low power consumption memory devices. Furthermore, the write current density (J_c) for perpendicular spintronic devices is defined by the equation $J_c = 2\alpha e t_F M_s \left(H_{\text{appl}} + H_k\right) / \hbar\eta$ [21], where J_c mainly relates to the α, the saturation magnetization (M_S), and the K_u. Notably, switching time is proportional to M_S. However, for interfacial PMAs (such as the Ta/CoFeB/MgO stack) and bulk PMA FePd thin films, their M_S=1100~1300 kA/m, which is relatively high.

Synthetic antiferromagnetic (SAF) structures, comprised of two ferromagnetic layers aligned in an antiparallel arrangement and separated by a thin (<1 nm) metallic spacer, are used extensively in multilayered magnetic sensors and memories [22], which is one of promising methods to obtain the low M_s of the ferromagnetic layer for p-MTJs [23-25]. Owing to the nearly net-zero flux configuration, SAFs are generally implemented as the reference layer to compensate the deleterious offset fields from other layers. More recently, SAFs were demonstrated to show the potential for faster write operation in magnetic domain-wall memories compared with single-layer counterparts due to additional torques on the magnetization induced by the interlayer coupling field [26]. A recent simulation has made a similar argument for single-domain MRAMs in which a SAF *free layer* replaces the single magnetic layer [27]. This work, supported partially by the DARPA-sponsored STARnet research center C-SPIN, shows that the design of a SAF-MTJ using conventional interfacial PMA materials in construction of a SAF free layer can enable switching energy-delay products on the order of 100 aJ-10 ps for a 10 nm diameter free layer with a 60 k_BT thermal stability factor, where k_B is the Boltzmann constant and T is the ambient temperature (300 K). In addition, PI Jian-Ping Wang recently developed a perpendicular interfacial synthetic-ferrimagnetic structure (CoFeB/Gd/CoFeB) and realized field-free switching using spin orbit torques [28], and the bulk L1$_0$-FePd p-SAF composite free layer as well as the integration into p-MTJs and the 25% TMR ratio has been obtained at room temperature after 350 °C post-annealing, even up to ~13% after 400 °C post-annealing.

Ultrafast STT switching in the sub-ns regime is one of the key issues for STT-RAM development. One of the crucial limitations for ultrafast switching is the incubation delay induced by pre-switching oscillation [29]. Several approaches have been proposed to minimize pre-switching oscillations in order to improve the switching speed in spin valves such as developing all perpendicular structures [30], applying a hard axis field to set the free layer equilibrium away from the easy axis [31], and adding an extra perpendicular polarizer [32-34]. As of now, limited work has been done on sub-nanosecond STT switching in MTJs. Minimum switching times of 400–580 ps at 50% switching probability have been reported in conventional in-plane MTJs [35,36]. By adding a perpendicular polarizer, Liu et al showed 100% switching at 500 ps with external field assistance in their MTJ device [37]. Rowlands *et al* achieved 50% switching probability at 120 ps under zero bias field in a fully orthogonal MTJ [38]. For this present approach, a notable achievement is the observation of group of 165(190) ps at 50(98)% switching probabilities in the in-plane MTJs [5]. However, switching probabilities have not been studied extensively p-MTJs – with the exception being a single simulation work which showed that a SAF-MTJ using conventional interfacial PMA materials in construction of a SAF free layer can enable switching energy-delay products on the order of 100 aJ-10 ps for a 10 nm diameter free layer. With voltage controlled magnetic anisotropy (VCMA) [39,8], the switching energy of conventional pMTJs can be further reduced to sub-10 fJ level [40,41]. However, due to the precessional nature of the switching, the time of the pulse voltage has to be accurately controlled, giving rise to a write error rate (WER) of 10^{-5}, which far exceeds the tolerable limits for reliable chip-level performance [42]. We are exploring a unique Even-VCMA effect where voltages with both polarities can reduce the PMA; this is theoretically predicted when the Fermi level of the FM is precisely controlled [43]. With the advanced SAF structure developed in the proposal, STT and Even-VCMA can work together in a complimentary fashion, eventually leading to ultra-low energy (<100 aJ), ultra-low WER (< 10^{-10}) and ultra-fast (< 50 ps) switching.

The key specifications for advanced pMTJs for computational random access memory systems are: ultra-high TMR ratio (>500%); ultra-fast switching (50 ps for 50% switching probability of a 60 k_BT pMTJ); ultra-low switching energy (100 aJ); ultra-small feature size (10 nm) and low damping constant for the magnetic storage layer (<0.01). This provides necessary robustness for a true computation-in-memory and computation-near-memory arrays.

With the realization of advanced pMTJs for computational random access memory systems, significant gains can be realized over classic, near- and edge memory computing. By using memory cells to carry out computation, one gains a 1400-fold improvement over near-memory computing in execution time, and a 40-fold energy reduction [44]. Surprisingly, our team has discovered a realization of a spintronic, reconfigurable in-memory binary neural network accelerator that performs with greater energy efficiency and throughput on image classification and genomics kernel tasks than corresponding CPU-, GPU- and FPGA-based implementations [45].

II. ACHIEVING ULTRAFAST SWITCHING MTJS

To reach ultimate fast switching, a balanced SAF (with near zero net magnetization) is desired. However, such as balanced SAF would require an extremely large exchange coupling constant which is not practical. Therefore, aside from the gains in write speed realized by the SAF structure, additional reduction in write delay may be achieved by electric-field tuning of the PMA using the so-called even voltage control of magnetic anisotropy (even-VCMA) effect.

Indeed, a promising approach to reduce the overall switching energy (E_{SW}) in MTJs is utilizing the interfacial perpendicular magnetic anisotropy (PMA) at the FM/oxide interface and the corresponding VCMA effect [8,36-38,46-48], where the MTJ can be precessionally switched by an effective in-plane field generated by a sub-ns voltage pulse. We have achieved a low switching current at 10^8-10^9 A/m^2 with fast speed at 400 ps, corresponding to a low E_{SW} that is below 20 fJ. However, due to the precessional nature of switching, the MTJ can be only be switched in a very tight window in VCMA, giving rising to a very large write error rate in the order of 10^{-5}, much larger than STT (10^{-10}). The core structure is CoFeB (0.9 nm)/MgO (1.6 nm)/CoFeB (1.5 nm), with thicknesses reported in parentheses. However, in another device with a very similar structure, we were able to extend the switching window from 0.5 ns to more than 1 ns with external field an applied in-plane instead of at 40°.

The key to reducing switching energy and switching time with interfacial SAF free layer is to utilize the VCMA effect to lower the energy barrier during switching. The efficiency of VCMA is characterized by the change of interfacial magnetic anisotropy density per unit electric field, $\Delta K_S/\Delta E_{ext}$. With the Even-VCMA effect where the STT and VCMA can be combined, truly ultra-low energy and ultra-fast switching is possible, simultaneously with a very low WER that is comparable to STT alone.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF SAF MTJS

A. Interfacial PMA MTJ

Consistent with current state-of-the art approaches, we have designed p-MTJs with interfacial perpendicular SAF free layers for sub-100 ps switching (see Fig. 2(a)). We have already achieved above 200% TMR with Mo dusting layers inserted at the Ta/CoFeB interface [4]. Unlike thick Mo layers that exhibited a strong (110) crystalline texture, the inserted Mo layer between Ta/CoFeB had little negative influence on the crystallization of CoFe (001), thereby combining the advantages of Mo as a good thermal barrier and Ta as a good boron sink. We envision possible solutions using other heavy metal insertions, to include W and Hf, which have potential to provide higher TMR.

The high probability switching of interfacial p-MTJs has been demonstrated in 100 nm diameter nanopillars. Our p-MTJs comprising a Ta/CoFeB/MgO free layer, rapid thermal annealed for 5 minutes at 300 °C exhibit a significant VCMA effect that enables fast, reliable switching at 200 ps. We report switching probability greater than 90% for a 200 ps pulse and 40 fJ switching energy. By engineering a thicker MgO tunneling barrier (approximately 50% thicker than the previous sample), the switching energy of a 100 nm p-MTJ can be reduced to 9 fJ, with a modest reduction in switching probability.

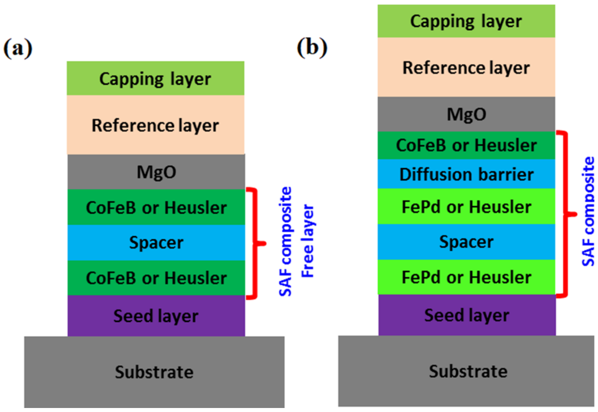


FIGURE 2: (a) The designed interfacial perpendicular SAF(p-SAF) structure, in which the CoFeB and Co-based in-plane Heusler alloys will be used as a ferromagnetic layer and Ru, Ta, Cr will be as a spacer to generate the synthetic-AFM, and Gd will be a spacer to lead to synthetic-ferrimagnetic layer. (b) The designed bulk p-SAF structure with $L1_0$-FePd and Mn-based perpendicular Heusler alloys as a ferromagnetic layer and Ru and Cr as a spacer.

B. Bulk PMA MTJ

The p-SAF structure with bulk PMA FePd thin films has been developed and integrated into p-MTJs as a free layer (see Fig. 2(b)). The p-SAF structure using bulk PMA FePd thin films through an fcc phase Ru spacer were designed and developed. It can be found that the $L1_0$-phase FePd p-SAF structure presents good PMA and antiferromagnetic coupling properties with a square shape minor M-H loop and a net remanent magnetization ~500 kA/m. The PMA constant K_u of the FePd p-SAF structure was then evaluated to be ~1.05 MJ/m^3 based on its M_s and H_K from the M-H loops, which is several times larger than that of interfacial PMA materials. The J_{iec} of the FePd p-SAF structure was calculated to be ~ -2.86 mJ/m^2, which is about one order of magnitude larger than that of the $[Co/Pd]_n$ p-SAF system with the same post-annealing temperature [50]. In addition, using magnified STEM we demonstrated that the Ru spacer follows the texture of FePd layer and forms the metastable fcc phase. In addition, most recently the p-MTJs with the $[Co/Pt]_n$ SAF layer from Japanese group showing high TMR (131% by CIPT after 350 °C post-annealing)[51], however, compared with FePd (α~0.002) [11], the $[Co/Pt]_n$ multilayer has a much larger α ~0.05~0.18 which will result in an appreciably larger switching current density which translates to higher write energy and slower write times.

IV. BENCHMARKING AND METRICS OF SAF MTJS FOR FAST SWITCHING

The relevant metrics of SAF pMTJs for fast switching and implementation as advanced MTJs for computation in random access memory have informed the development activities described above. These include device size, switching delay, switching energy, write error rate, thermal stability, tunneling magnetoresistance and the damping constant. For the interfacial p-MTJs, these results are specific to the CoFeB/MgO/CoFeB p-MTJ system. Here we have successfully engineered 100 nm nanopillars with energy-delay product 9 fJ-200 ps, and that are thermally stable with TMR exceeding 100%. The switching probability of these devices was 80% and damping constant 0.01.

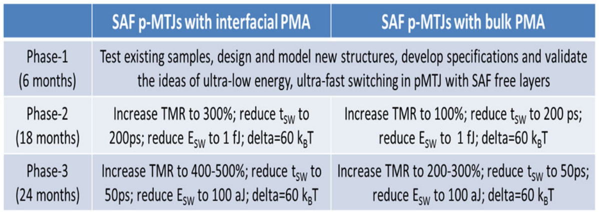
For the bulk SAF pMTJs, strategies have been developed to identify the useful buffer layers that can engineer a large perpendicular magnetic anisotropy in FePd, thereby providing thermal stability down to 10 nm diameter nanopillars. We find that these include Pt, Ru, Ir, Rh, but not Mo or Ta. This is consistent with the need for a fcc (001) buffer whose in-plane lattice parameter is comparable with the in-plane lattice parameter of FePd (0.385 nm). We have also shown the ability to engineer a bulk SAF trilayer using FePd/Ru/FePd, FePd/Ir/FePd and FePd/Rh/FePd. We find that Ru and Ir spacers are more thermally stable over the high-temperature growth and annealing treatment than the Rh spacer and can convey a net zero magnetization state at zero applied field, a prerequisite of a SAF device.

V. CONCLUSIONS

To deliver on the potential of MRAM for computation-in-memory, reductions in the energy- and delay characteristics of pMTJs must be demonstrated. Based on interfacial- and bulk perpendicular magnetic anisotropy materials, we believe there is a path to developing two novel perpendicular synthetic antiferromagnet (p-SAF) designs for ultra-fast and ultra-low power switching performance: one using interfacial PMA materials and one using bulk PMA materials. Our stacks are compatible with or close to the existing p-MTJ stack and fabrication process, which can transition to back-end-of-line semiconductor process practical within a 5-10 year time frame within our near-term roadmap shown in Fig. 3.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT *(Heading 5)*

This work is funded in part by DARPA HR001117S0056—FP—042 "Advanced MTJs for computation in and near random access memory," and by NIST.



	SAF p-MTJs with interfacial PMA	SAF p-MTJs with bulk PMA
Phase-1 (6 months)	Test existing samples, design and model new structures, develop specifications and validate the ideas of ultra-low energy, ultra-fast switching in pMTJ with SAF free layers	
Phase-2 (18 months)	Increase TMR to 300%; reduce t_{SW} to 200ps; reduce E_{SW} to 1 fJ; delta=60 k_BT	Increase TMR to 100%; reduce t_{SW} to 200 ps; reduce E_{SW} to 1 fJ; delta=60 k_BT
Phase-3 (24 months)	Increase TMR to 400-500%; reduce t_{SW} to 50ps; reduce E_{SW} to 100 aJ; delta=60 k_BT	Increase TMR to 200-300%; reduce t_{SW} to 50ps; reduce E_{SW} to 100 aJ; delta=60 k_BT

FIGURE 3: Roadmap to demonstration of advanced MTJs for CRAM.

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