Terahertz pulse generation from quantum cascade lasers

F. Wang[1*], K. Maussang[1], S. Moumdji[2], R. Colombelli[2], J. R. Freeman[3], I. Kundu[3], L. Li[3], E. H. Linfield[3], A. G. Davies[3], J. Mangeney[1], J. Tignon[1] & S. S. Dhillon[1]

[1]Laboratoire Pierre Aigrain, Ecole Normale Supérieure-PSL Research University, CNRS, Université Pierre et Marie Curie-Sorbonne Universités, Université Paris Diderot-Sorbonne Paris Cité, 24 rue Lhomond, 75231 Paris, France

[2]*Institut d'Electronique Fondamentale, Université Paris Sud,* CNRS, UMR 8622, 91405 Orsay, France

[3]School of Electronic and Electrical Engineering, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

*Contact Email: feihu.wang@lpa.ens.fr

Introduction

The generation of ultrashort and intense pulses of radiation from QCLs has proved to be challenging. It has been suggested that the ultrafast electron dynamics of these devices leads to inherent multimode instabilities that prevent mode-locking and pulse formation. Nonetheless, active mode-locking has been recently demonstrated [1] [2] in THz QCLs by electronically modulating the device at a microwave frequency corresponding to the cavity round-trip. This has been attributed to the longer gain recovery time of THz QCLs than those operating in the mid-infrared. Here we demonstrate that this is not the case: the dominant factor necessary for active pulse generation is in fact the microwave cavity and the synchronization between the propagating electronic microwave modulation and the THz pulse in the QCL. By using phase resolved detection [3] of the electric field in QCLs embedded in MM waveguides, we demonstrate that active mode locking requires the phase velocity of the microwave round trip modulation to equal the group velocity of the generated THz pulse. This allows the THz pulse to propagate in phase with the microwave modulation along the gain medium, permitting pulse generation [4].

Results

This work was performed on MM waveguide QCLs employing phonon depopulation active regions (designed for 2.6THz emission). Compared to all previous demonstrations (based on single plasmon and bound-to-continuum designs) these type of designs permit high temperature operation (> 77K) and large gain bandwidths (> 500 GHz). Figure 1a shows the time resolved electric field of the QCL at 77K that shows clearly the generation of a train of THz pulses when actively modelocked with a microwave modulation of 12.4GHz (The red curve shows the output field when the QCL is driven freely). Figure 1b is an expanded view of the THz pulse intensity showing the generation of 11ps pulses. The spectra (FFT of figure 1a) is shown in figure 1c) demonstrating more modes being brought above threshold when modelocked. The spacing between the modes corresponds to a group refractive index of 3.87, compared to 3.67 when not modelocked. The former is equal to the microwave index and this thus suggests that pulse generation is observed if the THz group index is equal to the effective modal index of the microwave modulation. Combined with pulse generation only observed close to threshold and an increase in the gain bandwidth does not translate into much shorter pulses, this implies that pulse generation from QCLs arises from a direct microwave modulation above and below laser threshold, and that the pulse width is limited by the sinusoidal microwave modulation. The QCL ultrafast gain recovery time is not a limiting factor and can be used rather as an advantage to generate more intense and shorter pulses if short intense electrical pulses can be used to switch on the QCL gain.

To conclude, we have shown that modelocked pulses are generated from QCLs when phase matching between the microwave phase velocity and the envelope of the THz emission is obtained. This works brings a significantly enhanced understanding of modelocking of QCLs and will permit new concepts to be explored to generate shorter and more intense pulses in the terahertz and mid-infrared ranges using a compact and practical semiconductor source.

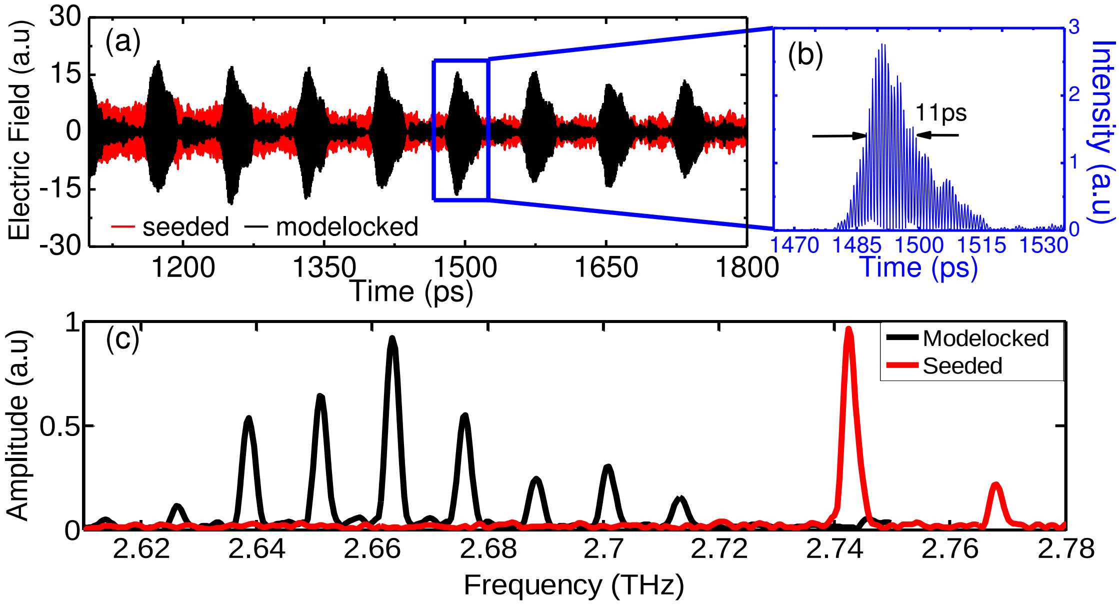

Fig. 1. Active modelocking of the metal-metal QCL at 77K. (a) Output electric field for the seeded (red) and the modelocked (black) QCL. (b) Expanded view of the THz pulse intensity between 1470ps and 1530 ps. (c) FFT of figure (a) for seeded (red) and modelocked (black) QCL

References

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