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Author(s)
Marukame, Takao; Ishikawa, Takayuki; Hakamata, Shinya; Matsuda, Ken-ichi; Uemura, Tetsuya; Yamamoto, Masafumi

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Highly spin-polarized tunneling in fully epitaxial Co$_2$Cr$_{0.6}$Fe$_{0.4}$Al/MgO/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ magnetic tunnel junctions with exchange biasing

Takao Marukame,a) Takayuki Ishikawa, Shinya Hakamata, Ken-ichi Matsuda, Tetsuya Uemura, and Masafumi Yamamoto

Division of Electronics for Informatics, Graduate School of Information Science and Technology, Hokkaido University, N14, W9, Kita-ku, Sapporo 060-0814, Japan

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Fully epitaxial magnetic tunnel junctions (MTJs) with exchange biasing were fabricated with a full-Heusler alloy Co$_2$Cr$_{0.6}$Fe$_{0.4}$Al (CCFA) thin film and a MgO tunnel barrier, where a Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ upper electrode was used in a synthetic ferrimagnetic Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$/Ru/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ trilayer exchange-biased with an IrMn layer through the Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/IrMn interface. The fabricated MTJs exhibited clear exchange-biased tunnel magnetoresistance (TMR) characteristics with high TMR ratios of 109% at room temperature and 317% at 4.2 K. A high tunneling spin polarization of 0.88 at 4.2 K was estimated for epitaxial CCFA films with the B2 structure.

We recently developed fully epitaxial MTJs that have a Co$_2$YZ thin film as a lower electrode, and a MgO tunnel barrier, where they used a polycrystalline Co$_2$Cr$_{0.6}$Fe$_{0.4}$Al (CCFA) thin film as a lower electrode and an amorphous AlO$_x$ tunnel barrier. Sakuraba et al. reported a high TMR ratio of 570% at 2 K (67% at RT) for MTJs consisting of a lower electrode made of epitaxially grown Co$_2$MnSi (CMS) (which is a fully-Hisaki alloy), an amorphous AlO$_x$ tunnel barrier, and a highly oriented CMS upper electrode.

We recently developed fully epitaxial MTJs that have a Co$_2$YZ thin film of CCFA, or Co$_2$MnGe, or Co$_2$MnSi (Ref. 14) as a lower electrode, and a MgO tunnel barrier, and have demonstrated a relatively high TMR ratio of 90% at RT (240% at 4.2 K) for CCFA/MgO/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ MTJs (Ref. 12) and a TMR ratio of 90% at RT (192% at 4.2 K) for Co$_2$MnSi/MgO/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ MTJs. A high tunneling spin polarization of 0.79 at 4.2 K was estimated from the TMR ratios for the epitaxial CCFA films with the B2 structure. For these CCFA/MgO/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ MTJs, however, the parallel and antiparallel magnetization configurations were controlled by using the difference in the coercive forces between the CCFA lower electrode and the Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ upper electrode.

This resulted in peaked magnetoresistance versus magnetic field characteristics, which probably led to TMR ratios lower than they potentially could be. Exchange biasing is favorable for realizing high degrees of the parallel and antiparallel magnetization configurations. Our purpose in the present study was to demonstrate the potentially high tunneling spin polarization of a Co-based full-Heusler alloy of CCFA. To do this, we fabricated fully epitaxial MTJs with exchange biasing that consisted of a CCFA thin film and a MgO tunnel barrier, and then investigated the TMR characteristics of the fabricated MTJs. Our approach was to use an upper electrode of Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ film in an antiferromagnetically coupled (i.e., synthetic ferrimagnetic) Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$/Ru/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ trilayer exchange-biased by an IrMn antiferromagnetic layer through the Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/IrMn interface to obtain a high exchange-bias field value ($H_{eb}$) for epitaxial Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ electrodes.

The fabricated MTJ layer structure was as follows: (from the substrate side) MgO buffer (10 nm)/CCFA (50 nm)/MgO barrier (2.4 nm)/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ (3.4 nm)/Ru (0.8 nm)/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ (2 nm)/IrMn (10 nm)/Ru cap (5 nm). All layers in these MTJs were successively deposited on MgO(001) single-crystal substrates in an ultrahigh vacuum chamber (with a base pressure of about 8 × 10$^{-8}$ Pa) through the combined use of magnetron sputtering and electron beam evaporation. The CCFA lower electrode was deposited by rf magnetron sputtering at RT and subsequently annealed in situ at 500 °C. The CCFA film composition was determined to be Co$_{2.5}$Fe$_{0.39}$Al$_{1.12}$, with an accuracy of 2%–3% for each element, through inductively coupled plasma analysis. The MgO tunnel barrier was deposited by electron beam evaporation at RT. The layers of Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$, Ru, Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$, and IrMn were all deposited by magnetron sputtering at RT. We carried out in situ reflection high-energy electron diffraction (RHEED) observations for each successive layer during fabrication. Because RHEED observation and deposition of the ferromagnetic and antiferromagnetic layers under a magnetic field were not compatible, all the layers were deposited with no magnetic field applied. We fabricated fully epitaxial MTJs with the layer structure described above by using photolithography and Ar ion milling. The fabricated junction size

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a)Electronic mail: marukame@ist.hokudai.ac.jp
b)Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; electronic mail: yamamoto@nano.ist.hokudai.ac.jp
was $10 \times 10 \, \mu m^2$. After the microfabrication, the MTJs were annealed at 175 °C for 1 h in a vacuum of $5 \times 10^{-2}$ Pa under a magnetic field of 5 kOe. The magnetoresistance was then measured through a dc four-probe method at temperatures from RT to 4.2 K. We defined the TMR ratio as $(R_{AP}−R_{AP})/R_{AP}$, where $R_{AP}$ and $R_{AP}$ are the respective resistance-area products for the antiparallel and parallel magnetization configurations between the upper and lower electrodes.

We will now describe the structural characterization of the fabricated layer structures. First, we will describe the structural properties of the CCFA/MgO/Co50Fe50 tunnel junction trilayer within the MTJ layer structure. RHEED patterns observed in situ for each layer during fabrication clearly indicated that the CCFA lower electrode, MgO tunnel barrier, and Co50Fe50 upper electrode grew epitaxially. X-ray diffraction measurement of the 50-nm-thick CCFA thin film annealed in situ at 500 °C showed that the film grew epitaxially and crystallized into the B2 structure. Figure 1 shows a cross-sectional high-resolution transmission electron microscope (HRTEM) image of the fabricated MTJ layer structure from the CCFA layer to the IrMn layer. This image clearly reveals that all the layers of the CCFA/MgO/Co50Fe50 basic tunnel junction trilayer were grown epitaxially and were single crystalline. It also confirmed that extremely smooth and abrupt interfaces were formed. All these structural properties agreed with our previous results. When we used the difference in the coercive forces to form the antiparallel magnetization configurations between the CCFA lower electrode and the Co50Fe50 upper electrode, we obtained relatively high $H_{ex}$ values of about 350 Oe at RT and about 1000 Oe at 4.2 K as shown in Fig. 2. We can reasonably attribute the high $H_{ex}$ values obtained for the fabricated MTJs to a lower net saturation magnetization of the synthetic ferrimagnetic trilayer compared with a saturation magnetization of the Co50Fe50 electrode.

Figure 3 shows the TMR ratio for a fabricated fully epitaxial, exchange-biased Co3Co0.6Fe0.4Al/MgO/Co50Fe50 MTJ (CCFA-MTJ) as a function of temperature ($T$) from 4.2 K to RT (this is the same MTJ as shown in Fig. 2). For comparison, the TMR ratio as a function of $T$ is also plotted for a fully epitaxial, exchange-biased Co50Fe50/MgO/Co50Fe50 MTJ (a reference Co50Fe50-MTJ) identically fabricated with the same layer structure as that of the exchange-biased CCFA-MTJ except that the lower electrode CCFA was replaced with Co50Fe50. The Co50Fe50-MTJs were postfabrication annealed under the same annealing conditions as for the CCFA-MTJs (i.e., at 175 °C under a magnetic field of 5 kOe). The layer structure (from the substrate side) was Co50Fe50 (50 nm)/MgO (2.2 nm)/Co50Fe50 (3 nm)/Ru.

FIG. 1. Cross-sectional high-resolution transmission electron microscope image of a MTJ layer structure that consisted of Co3Co0.6Fe0.4Al (CCFA) (50 nm)/MgO (2 nm)/Co50Fe50 (3 nm)/Ru (0.8 nm)/Co50Fe50 (2 nm)/IrMn (10 nm)/Ru cap (5 nm), along the [110] direction of the CCFA.

FIG. 2. (Color online) Typical magnetoresistance curves at RT and 4.2 K for a fully epitaxial, exchange-biased Co3Co0.6Fe0.4Al/MgO/Co50Fe50 MTJ. The junction size was $10 \times 10 \, \mu m^2$. The bias voltage was 5 mV.

FIG. 3. Temperature dependence of the TMR ratio of a fully epitaxial, exchange-biased Co3Co0.6Fe0.4Al/MgO/Co50Fe50 MTJ (reference Co50Fe50-MTJ).
(0.8 nm)/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ (2 nm)/IrMn (10 nm)/Ru cap (5 nm), and the structure was grown on a MgO-buffered MgO substrate. The Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs showed TMR ratios of 185% at 4.2 K and 125% at RT. As shown in Fig. 3, the TMR ratio of the CCFA-MTJ was definitely higher than that of the Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJ below about 220 K. and it reached 317% at 4.2 K (although it was slightly lower at RT).

We next estimated the tunneling spin polarization of the epitaxial CCFA electrode from the obtained TMR ratios. The TMR ratios for MTJs have been traditionally related to the spin polarizations at $E_F$, $P_1$, and $P_2$, of the ferromagnetic electrodes through Jullière’s model (Ref. 6), i.e., $\text{TMR} = 2P_1P_2/(1 - P_1P_2)$. Jullière’s model was derived by assuming a loss of coherence in tunneling (i.e., nonconservation of the electron’s wave vector component parallel to the interface). However, a straightforward application of Jullière’s model for a TMR ratio of 317% at 4.2 K for fully epitaxial CCFA/MgO/Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ MTJs with a Co$_{50}$Fe$_{50}$ electrode spin polarization of 0.50, derived from $dl/dV$ curves of superconductor/AlO$_x$/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ tunnel structures, corresponding to the originally defined spin polarization using majority- and minority-spin band density of states at $E_F$, resulted in an unrealistically high $P$ value exceeding 1.0 for the epitaxial CCFA electrode. This result indicates enhancement of the TMR ratio by a coherent tunneling contribution for fully epitaxial CCFA/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs. Furthermore, the obtained TMR ratios of 185% at 4.2 K and 125% at RT clearly indicate enhancement of the TMR ratio by a coherent tunneling contribution for the reference Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MTJs. Therefore, we estimated the tunneling spin polarization or effective spin polarization for the epitaxial Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ electrode, $P_{\text{CoFe}}$, by applying Jullière’s model for the TMR ratio of 185% at 4.2 K (125% at RT) of the reference Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MTJs. We obtained a $P_{\text{CoFe}}$ value of 0.69 at 4.2 K (0.62 at RT), which was higher than the above $P$ value of 0.50 derived from superconductor/AlO$_x$/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ tunnel structures. Similarly, we estimated the tunneling spin polarization or effective spin polarization for an epitaxial CCFA electrode in fully epitaxial CCFA/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs, $P_{\text{CCFA}}$, by applying Jullière’s model for the TMR ratio of 317% at 4.2 K (109% at RT) of the CCFA-MTJs, along with a $P_{\text{CoFe}}$ value of 0.69 at 4.2 K (0.62 at RT) derived from the TMR ratio for the reference Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MTJs; in this case, we obtained a high tunneling spin polarization of 0.88 at 4.2 K (0.57 at RT) for the epitaxial CCFA thin film with the B2 structure. Although a rigorous comparison is not justified, the thus-obtained $P_{\text{CCFA}}$ value of 0.88 is larger than the theoretically predicted $P_{\text{CCFA}}$ value of 0.78 (Ref. 18) even though we assumed an effective spin polarization of 0.69 at 4.2 K (0.62 at RT) for the epitaxial Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ electrodes in the estimation rather than 0.50 at 4.2 K as was derived from superconductor/AlO$_x$/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ tunnel structures. This result also indicates a coherent tunneling contribution for fully epitaxial CCFA/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs.

Last, we will discuss the $T$ dependence of the TMR ratio of the fabricated CCFA-MTJs. If we use parameter $\gamma = \alpha(4.2 \text{ K})/\alpha(\text{RT})$, where $\alpha$ is the TMR ratio, to represent the degree of $T$ dependence of the TMR ratio, $\gamma$ for the CCFA-MTJs was 2.9. This $\gamma$ value was higher than the value of 2.1 previously reported for CMS/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs [$\alpha(\text{RT}) = 90\%$ and $\alpha(4.2 \text{ K}) = 192\%$] (Ref. 14) and in contrast to a more moderate value of $\gamma = 1.5$ [$\alpha(\text{RT}) = 125\%$ and $\alpha(4.2 \text{ K}) = 185\%$] for the reference Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MTJs. Regarding the $T$ dependences of $R_{\text{AP}}$ and $R_{\text{AP}}$, $R_{\text{AP}}$ also decreased with increasing $T$, while $R_{\text{AP}}$ was almost independent of $T$ for the CCFA-MTJs (not shown). [These $T$ dependences of $R_{\text{AP}}$ and $R_{\text{AP}}$ were similar to those observed for Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{16}$ MTJs (Ref. 19) and CMS/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs.14] These results indicate that the decreasing TMR ratio with increasing $T$ for the CCFA-MTJs is mainly due to the $R_{\text{AP}}$ decrease. To clarify the reason for the strong $T$ dependence of the TMR ratio, or equivalently that of the $R_{\text{AP}}$ observed for the CCFA/MgO/Co$_{90}$Fe$_{10}$ MTJs, further systematic study is needed.

In summary, we fabricated fully epitaxial, exchange-biased MTJs with a CCFA lower electrode and a MgO tunnel barrier. These MTJs exhibited high TMR ratios of 109% at RT and 317% at 4.2 K. A high tunneling spin polarization of 0.88 at 4.2 K was estimated for the epitaxial CCFA film with the B2 structure. The demonstrated high TMR ratios confirmed that fully epitaxial MTJs with a MgO tunnel barrier are promising as a key device structure for fully utilizing the potentially high spin polarization of Co-based full-Heusler alloy thin films.

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