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Effect of Near-Threshold Ionization on Electron Attachment in Gaseous Dielectrics

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It has been predicted that near-threshold ionization (NTI) in a gaseous dielectric inhibits the development of electron avalanche when the gaseous dielectric has a sufficient capability for low-energy electron attachment. The NTI leaves little energy for the primary and secondary electrons involved in the ionization; thus, both electrons can be captured by dielectric gas molecules without further ionization. A computational estimation indicates that this process can occur in SF₆.

KEYWORDS: gaseous dielectric, electron attachment, ionization, threshold, electron avalanche, sulfur hexafluoride

Let us consider an ionization collision in SF₆ at the energy ε near the ionization threshold εₗ. The residual energy εₗ is shared between the primary (colliding) and secondary (released) electrons. Their energies, ε₁ and ε₂, satisfy ε₁ + ε₂ = εₗ and ε₁ : ε₂ = (1 - ξ) : ξ (see Fig. 1). Here, ξ is the energy division ratio (0 ≤ ξ ≤ 1). Because SF₆ has a large attachment cross section at low electron energies (less than 1 eV) [1-3], it is probable that both of the primary and secondary electrons are captured before further ionizations when εₗ is sufficiently small. In such a case, the number of free electrons in SF₆ decreases through the NTI and succeeding electron attachments.

The attachment capability of SF₆ can be quantified as the ratio Pₐₐₜ of electrons undergoing attachment before ionization. A Monte Carlo simulation has been carried out to calculate Pₐₐₜ as a function of the initial electron energy εᵢₗ, at which the electrons start their flights in SF₆. Here, εᵢₗ corresponds to ε₁ and ε₂ for the primary and secondary electrons restarting their flights after the NTI. The collision cross sections of SF₆ have been obtained from refs. 1 and 2. The electric field reduced by the gas molecule number density, E/N, has been assumed to be 300–400 Td (1 Td = 10⁻¹⁷ V cm²). This E/N range includes (E/N)ₗ,critical = 359.3 ± 0.3 Td [3], at which the effective ionization coefficient a = a - η is zero (a and η are the ionization and attachment coefficients, respectively). At each εᵢₗ, 100 000 electrons have been traced. Figure 2 shows Pₐₐₜ. In order to decrease the number of electrons by the IAA, at least one of the two electrons involved in an NTI must attach. The result Pₐₐₜ > 1/2 represents that more than one-half of the electrons released with εᵢₗ are captured by SF₆ without ionization on average. However, Pₐₐₜ = 1/2 is not the critical value that guarantees a decrease in the number of electrons because the ionizations to be induced by the uncaptured electrons afterward are not always the NTIs compensable by the IAA. It is not easy to analytically specify the critical value of Pₐₐₜ, and the range of εᵢₗ allowed for the NTI to guarantee a decrease in the number of electrons. Nonetheless, it is indicated that Pₐₐₜ of SF₆ at low εᵢₗ values is sufficiently high to let the IAA work.

We show that the NTI in SF₆ reduces the number of electrons by another Monte Carlo simulation as a verification of the IAA theory explained above. We calculate the time-variant population n(t) of the electrons originating from the initial 100 000 electrons undergoing ionization in the near-threshold energy range ε₁ ≤ ε' ≤ ε₉. For a clear demonstration of the decrease in the number of electrons after the NTI, we choose the lower and upper limits of the near-threshold range to be ε₁ = ε₉ = 15.8 eV.

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and $\epsilon_u = 15.9 \text{ eV}$, respectively; $\epsilon_{\text{res}}$ to be shared by a pair of primary and secondary electrons is at most 0.1 \text{ eV}. In order to take account of the onset of the ionization cross section $q_{\text{ion}}$ of SF$_6$ from $\epsilon_{\text{ion}}$, $\epsilon'$ is chosen as $\epsilon' = \epsilon + \sqrt{\chi(\epsilon_u - \epsilon)}$ with the uniform random number $0 \leq \chi \leq 1$. $N$ is set at $3.54 \times 10^{16}$ cm$^{-3}$, assuming a gas pressure of 133 Pa (1 Torr) at 0°C. Because the probability density function for $\xi$ is unknown, we assume that $\xi$ distributes uniformly between 0 and 1.

Figure 3 shows $n(t)$ after the NTI. In the beginning, the number of initial electrons $n_0$ is 100 000 at $t = 0$ (o in Fig. 3), and the electrons multiply instantly from $n_0$ to $2n_0$ by ionization (from o to ●). At this time, most of the energy of the primary electrons is lost as the ionization energy to release the secondary electrons. The electron energy after the NTI is low; thus, more than one-half of the electrons are captured by SF$_6$ in about 0.2 ns. Then, after a few nanoseconds of relaxation, the electrons establish an exponential growth.

The key point of this result is that the exponential growth of $n(t)$ starts effectively from electrons less than $n_0$. The IAA mechanism that one NTI induces more than one electron attachment has been verified. The NTI in SF$_6$ has a function to reduce the number of free electrons. This finding is also supported by the result of an additional calculation by a propagator method, which is a numerical technique for solving the Boltzmann equation for the electron energy distribution. When we suppress the NTI of SF$_6$ in the energy range 15.8–15.9 eV forcibly, $(E/N)_{\text{critical}}$ becomes slightly lower while $\alpha$ decreases. This is due to the disappearance of the IAA. The decrease in $\eta$ due to the disappearance of the IAA is greater than that in $\alpha$ due to the elimination of the NTI, which makes $\tilde{\alpha} = \alpha - \eta$ higher.

The NTI that induces the IAA in SF$_6$ can occur in a limited energy range. However, as long as $q_{\text{ion}} \neq 0$ nearby $\epsilon_{\text{ion}}$, ionization in SF$_6$ involves the NTI to some extent. This indicates the presence of the IAA in SF$_6$ as an actual electron process.

In conclusion, we have explained the mechanism of the IAA and demonstrated the time-variant population of electrons involved in the NTI in SF$_6$. The increase in the number of electrons due to the NTI in SF$_6$ is compensated by the succeeding decrease in the number of electrons due to the attachment of the primary and secondary electrons. It has been indicated that the ionization process in SF$_6$ involves the IAA, which contributes to the suppression of electron avalanche in SF$_6$.

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