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Pinned synthetic ferrimagnets with perpendicular anisotropy and tuneable exchange bias

J. Sort, B. Rodmacq, S. Auffret, and B. Dieny
SPINTEC, Département de Recherche Fondamentale sur la Matière Condensée, CEA/Grenoble, 38054 Grenoble Cedex 9, France

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Pinned synthetic ferrimagnets (syFerri) with perpendicular-to-plane magnetic anisotropy, of the form AP1/Ru/AP2/FeMn [where AP1 and AP2 are (Co/Pt) multilayers], have been prepared and characterized. The magnitudes of the exchange bias fields of both AP1 and AP2 can be tuned at room temperature by simply varying the relative number of (Co/Pt) repeats in each multilayer. This effect can be quantitatively interpreted by considering the different energy contributions involved during magnetization reversal. Moreover, from the values of these fields, the characteristic parameters of the system (i.e., coupling strength through the Ru and AP2/FeMn pinning energy), can be evaluated. Interestingly, an extended plateau with a virtually constant magnetization is observed around zero field when the number of Co/Pt repeats in AP1 is equal or larger than in AP2. This is very appealing for field sensor or memories applications using spin valves or tunnel junctions with perpendicular anisotropy, since it offers a large dynamic range over which the magnetic configuration of the syFerri remains stable. © 2003 American Institute of Physics.

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Recently, in spin-valve based read heads for high density magnetic recording media,1 the replacement of the traditional antiferromagnetic (AFM) exchange layer by synthetic antiferromagnets (syAFM) has been found to be very appealing, since syAFM considerably enhance the thermal and magnetic stability of these sensors and reduce the magnetostatic field created by the pinned layer on the free layer in submicronic devices.2 Typically, a syAFM consists of two ferromagnetic (FM) layers separated by a nonmagnetic spacer, such as Ru (6–10 Å thick), which couples them antiferromagnetically due to the Ruderman–Kittel–(Kasuya)–Yosida [RK(K)Y] interaction.3

All syAFM-based spin valves elaborated so far exhibit an in-plane magnetic anisotropy. Just recently, spin valves and tunnel junctions with perpendicular-to-plane anisotropy have also been developed.4 However, they do not make use of syAFM. Studies on syAFM-like systems with perpendicular anisotropy are very scarce5 and the effect of varying the relative thickness of the two FM layers in contact with Ru has only been systematically investigated in in-plane syAFM.6 Nevertheless, a few studies on the physics of antiferromagnetically coupled multilayers with perpendicular anisotropy have been reported.7,8

In this letter, we demonstrate the feasibility to grow pinned synthetic ferrimagnets (syFerri) with perpendicular anisotropy, exhibiting tuneable exchange bias at room temperature. The systems consist of two antiferromagnetically coupled (Pt/Co) multilayers (ML), denoted as AP1 and AP2, in which AP2 is, in turn, exchange biased with an AFM.9 The switching fields of both AP1 and AP2 can be easily tuned by simply varying the relative number of (Pt/Co) repeats in each multilayer.

A series of pinned synthetic ferrimagnets with the composition Pt (50 Å)/[Co (5 Å)/Pt(20 Å)]n/Co(5 Å)/Ru(7 Å)/[Co(5 Å)/Pt(20 Å)]3/Co(5 Å)/FeMn(130 Å)/Pt(20 Å), i.e., AP1/Ru/AP2/FeMn, with n = 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, were deposited onto thermally oxidized Si substrates by dc magnetron sputtering. The AP1 multilayer contains a variable number of Co layers, i.e., nAP1 = n + 1, whereas AP2 contains always 4 Co layers. All depositions were performed at room temperature. A stray field perpendicular to plane is known to exist over the substrate area in the sputtering unit. Hysteresis loops of as-deposited samples were recorded using extraordinary Hall effect, with magnetic field applied perpendicular to the film direction.10

Figure 1 shows the hysteresis loops of the pinned syFerri with nAP1 = 2, 3, 4, and 6. The magnetic configurations of AP1 and AP2 multilayers are indicated by the thin and thick arrows, respectively. It can be seen that when the field is reduced from positive to negative saturation, the magnetization of AP1 always switches before that of AP2, MAP2, at a positive field denoted by HE,AP1. A broad plateau is then observed around zero field, over which the two multilayers are in antiparallel magnetic configuration. When the field is further reduced, the magnetization of the AP2 layer (MAP2) finally switches at a negative field HEP2. Interestingly, for nAP1 = 2, the switching of MAP2 is accompanied by a backswitching (i.e., spin-flip) of MAP1, due to the antiferromagnetic RK(K)Y interaction through Ru. Finally, MAP1 switches down again at a slightly larger negative field.

When increasing the field from negative to positive saturation, significant differences in the magnetization reversal process are observed depending on the value of nAP1.

(1) For nAP1 = 2 and 3, MAP2 switches first at a characteristic negative field HE,AP1. Note that since the energy balance which determines this switching field is exactly the same as the one which determines the switching field of MAP1 at decreasing field from positive saturation, the rela-

Electronic mail: sort@drfmc.ceng.cea.fr
A positive field corresponding to the reversal of $M_{AP1}$. Note that the backswitching of $M_{AP1}$ is not observed for $n_{AP1} = 3$ because it would cost too much Zeeman energy.

For $n_{AP1} > 4$, $M_{AP2}$ switches first. This results in an extended plateau with constant magnetization around zero field. We point out that in these cases, there is only one stable remanent state of the system in zero field. This is a situation of practical interest for device applications in order to use such a synthetic pinned layer as a reference layer in spin valves or tunnel junctions with perpendicular magnetization. At a larger positive field, the magnetization $M_{AP1}$ reverses towards positive saturation.

The differences in the magnetization curves of the different systems can be understood as the result, in each syFerri, of an interplay between the Zeeman energy, the exchange energy across the Ru spacer and the pinning energy with the FeMn. The purpose of the following calculations is to relate the values of the AP1 and AP2 switching fields with the coupling energy per unit area through the Ru spacer ($A_{Ru}$) and the coupling energy per unit area with the antiferromagnetic layer ($A_{pinning}$). These calculations assume that the system is always able to reach its lowest energy minimum, i.e., as a first step, we do not try to describe the irreversibility associated with the switching of $M_{AP1}$ and $M_{AP2}$.

Let us first consider the switching of AP1 when decreasing field from positive saturation. This switching occurs at a positive field when the gain in coupling energy due to the antiferromagnetic coupling through the Ru spacer balances the cost in Zeeman energy due to the negative orientation of $M_{AP1}$ in the positive field. If $t_{Co}$ is the thickness of the individual Co layers and $M_s_{Co}$ its saturation magnetization, then the bias field of AP1, $H_{E,AP1} (1/n_{AP1})$, is given by:

$$H_{E,AP1} = H_{E,AP1} = A_{Ru}/n_{AP1}.$$  

This expression predicts a linear variation of $H_{E,AP1}$ vs $1/n_{AP1}$, provided that $A_{Ru}$ is constant. If one plots $H_{E,AP1}$ as a function of $1/n_{AP1}$, a linear dependence of $H_{E,AP1}$ is experimentally observed, as shown in Fig. 2. Assuming $M_s_{Co} = 1450$ emu/cm$^3$ (bulk value), the slope of $H_{E,AP1} (1/n_{AP1})$ in Fig. 2 allows us to determine $A_{Ru}$. One obtains $A_{Ru} = 0.134$ erg/cm$^2$. Note that the possibility to tune perpen-
adic exchange bias by changing the number of Co/Pt repeats has already been reported in the literature.\textsuperscript{11-13} The coercivity of AP\textsubscript{1} can be also easily determined from the AP\textsubscript{1} minor loops. The coercive field increases with $n_{\text{AP}_1}$, as commonly observed in (Pt/Co) multilayers, from 95 Oe for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=2$ to 200 Oe for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=6$. This is due to an increase of the overall perpendicular anisotropy in AP\textsubscript{1} with the number of Pt/Co interfaces, as well as to the increase of structural defects, which may act as pinning centers for domain wall propagation.

The switching of $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ at negative fields occurs when the Zeeman energy brought by the applied field exceeds the cost in energy to overcome both the antiferromagnetic coupling through the Ru spacer and the exchange bias energy with FeMn. The associated coercivity can be clearly seen for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=4$ and 6 from the width of the AP\textsubscript{2} minor loops [Figs. 1(c) and 1(d)]. Note that the coercivity of AP\textsubscript{2} is larger than for AP\textsubscript{1} for the same number of repeats due to the exchange biasing of AP\textsubscript{2} with FeMn.\textsuperscript{10} The bias field of AP\textsubscript{2}, $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}$, can be evaluated by considering the shift of the AP\textsubscript{2} minor loops for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=4$ and 6. One finds $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}$ to be around 810 Oe. $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}$ is then related to the coupling constants by the expression

$$n_{\text{AP}_2}M_{\text{Co}}f_{\text{Co}}H_{E,\text{AP}_2} = -(A_{\text{Ru}} + A_{\text{pinning}}).$$

This relationship allows to calculate $A_{\text{pinning}}$ from the knowledge of $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}$. Namely $A_{\text{pinning}} = 0.068$ erg/cm\textsuperscript{2}.

The values of $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}$ in the syFerri are significantly larger than the ones for Pt/Co ML exchange biased with FeMn (i.e., about 810 Oe, compared 150 Oe in simple ML + FeMn structures).

It is also worthwhile to illustrate how the layers switch the way they do and not in the reverse order. Note that, when decreasing field from positive saturation, if $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ switched before $M_{\text{AP}_1}$, Eqs. (1) and (2) would no longer govern the reversal. Instead, the hypothetical bias field of AP\textsubscript{2}, $H_{E,\text{AP}_2}(\text{hypo})$ would be given by the following equation:

$$n_{\text{AP}_2}M_{\text{Co}}f_{\text{Co}}H_{E,\text{AP}_2(\text{hypo})} = (A_{\text{Ru}} - A_{\text{pinning}}).$$

Comparing the values of $H_{E,\text{AP}_1}$ and $H_{E,\text{AP}_2(\text{hypo})}$ [Eqs. (1) and (3)], it is found that $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ would reverse before $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ only if

$$A_{\text{Ru}} - A_{\text{pinning}} < A_{\text{Ru}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (4)

Taking the previously determined values of $A_{\text{Ru}}$ and $A_{\text{pinning}}$, one finds that Eq. (4) is never fulfilled, which explains why $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ always switches first when the field is decreased from positive saturation.

Analogously, when the field is increased from negative saturation, it can be shown that $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ reverses before $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ only if

$$A_{\text{Ru}} + A_{\text{pinning}} > A_{\text{Ru}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

Condition (5) is fulfilled for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=3$, 4, 5, and 6 and, consistently, it is experimentally observed that $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ reverses before $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=4$, 5, and 6. Similarly, Eq. (5) is not fulfilled for $n_{\text{AP}_1}=2$ in agreement with the experimental observation that $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ switches first. For $n_{\text{AP}_1}=3$, although inequality (5) is fulfilled, $M_{\text{AP}_1}$ switches before $M_{\text{AP}_2}$ [see Fig. 1(c)]. This is because the coercive field in AP\textsubscript{2} is always larger than in AP\textsubscript{1}.

In conclusion, it has been shown that pinned synthetic ferrimagnets with perpendicular anisotropy, can be prepared. The bias fields of both ML constituting the syFerri can be tuned at room temperature by varying the relative number of Co/Pt repeats comprised in each ML and their values are determined by the exchange constants $A_{\text{Ru}}$ and $A_{\text{pinning}}$. However, an extended plateau with constant magnetization around zero field and a single stable remanent state is obtained when the condition $n_{\text{AP}_1} > A_{\text{Ru}}/(A_{\text{Ru}} + A_{\text{pinning}})$ for $n_{\text{AP}_1}$ is fulfilled. These properties are particularly useful to implement spin valves or tunnel junctions with perpendicular anisotropy and enhanced magnetic stability.

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