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Direct Observation of the Transition from the Conventional Superconducting State to the \( \pi \) State in a Controllable Josephson Junction

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We measure the full supercurrent-phase relation of a controllable \( \pi \) junction around the transition from the conventional 0 state to the \( \pi \) state. We show that around the transition the Josephson supercurrent-phase relation changes from \( I_{sc} = I_{c} \sin(\varphi) \) to \( I_{sc} = I_{c} \sin(2\varphi) \). This implies that, around the transition, two minima in the junction free energy exist, one at \( \varphi = 0 \) and one at \( \varphi = \pi \), whereas only one minimum exists at the 0 state (at \( \varphi = 0 \)) and at the \( \pi \) state (at \( \varphi = \pi \)). Theoretical calculations based on the quasiclassical theory are in good agreement with the observed behavior.

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The fundamental process which enables supercurrent transport in superconductor-normal-metal-superconductor (SNS) junctions is Andreev reflection. As a result, a spectrum of supercurrent carrying states is formed in the junction normal region which consists of both positive and negative contributions to the supercurrent. By populating the negative contributions and de-populating the positive ones, it is, in principle, possible to obtain a situation where the supercurrent flows in the negative direction with respect to the macroscopic phase difference \( \varphi \) between the superconducting electrodes. This corresponds to a \( \pi \) junction [1] in which the stable zero current state of the junction is located at a value \( \varphi = \pi \) in contrast with \( \varphi = 0 \) for a conventional junction. This effect is predicted in ballistic systems [2,3] as well as in diffusive systems [4–7] and has recently been observed in controllable \( \pi \) junctions based on niobium-gold, niobium-silver, or aluminium-silver in the diffusive limit [8–10]. Other superconducting systems that exhibit a \( \pi \) shift in macroscopic phase difference are bicrystals [11] or “s-d” contacts in ceramic superconductors [12] and \( \pi \) junctions using a dilute ferromagnet \( f' \) as the “normal” region of a \( S-f'-S \) junction [13].

The state of the junction, i.e., a 0 state or a \( \pi \) state, depends in most of these systems on the sample design or on temperature. This is in contrast with controllable \( \pi \) junctions where the population of the supercurrent carrying states and, hence, the state of the junction is determined by the application of a control voltage \( V_c \) over additional contacts connected to the junction normal region. If \( V_c < V_{c,\text{critical}} \), a geometry and temperature dependent critical value, the junction is in the 0 state, and, if \( V_c > V_{c,\text{critical}} \), the junction is in the \( \pi \) state.

The question arises how the transition occurs from the 0 state to the \( \pi \) state, i.e., how the energy landscape evolves from having one minimum at \( \varphi = 0 \) to having one minimum at \( \varphi = \pi \). Does the energy landscape become completely flat, indicating a total absence of Josephson coupling or does the minimum at \( \varphi = \pi \) start to develop while the one at \( \varphi = 0 \) is still present? The latter implies that there is a region around the transition where the energy landscape has two minima, one at \( \varphi = 0 \) and one at \( \varphi = \pi \). This is of considerable interest with respect to possible applications in quantum computing, which rely on systems with a double degenerate ground state [14,15]. The free energy of the junction, \( W(\varphi) \), is given by [16]

\[
W(\varphi) = \frac{\phi_0}{2\pi} \int_0^\varphi I_{sc}(\varphi') d\varphi.
\]

Hence, a double minimum in the free energy implies a doubling in the periodicity of the supercurrent-phase relation: \( I_{sc} = I_c \sin(\varphi) \Rightarrow I_{sc} = I_c \sin(2\varphi) \) (\( I_c \) is the critical current of the junction). In this Letter, we present an experiment in which we measure the full supercurrent-phase relation of a controllable \( \pi \) junction, in particular, around the 0 to \( \pi \) transition. We observe at the transition a doubling in the periodicity of the supercurrent-phase relation of the junction indicating the presence of two minima in \( W(\varphi) \), one at \( \varphi = 0 \) and one at \( \varphi = \pi \). We show that the measurements are in good agreement with predictions based on the well-established quasiclassical theory on diffusive SNS junctions [17].

The measurements are performed using a controllable \( \pi \) SQUID (superconducting quantum interference device) as shown in Fig. 1. A loop of Nb (50 nm thick) with a surface area of 70 \( \mu \text{m}^2 \) has two controllable \( \pi \) junctions as weak links. Each controllable \( \pi \) junction consists of a 50 nm thick Ag rectangle with length \( L = 750 \text{ nm} \) and width \( w = 600 \text{ nm} \) connected by means of a 150 nm wide silver wire to the center of another, V-shaped silver wire that we will call control channel. The silver rectangle overlaps the niobium over a distance of 200 nm forming a coplanar SNS junction with clean Nb-Ag interfaces.
where we assume that $I_c$ and furthermore assume that $V_c$ cause the transition to a $\pi$ state at sufficiently large values of $V_c$.

The diffusion constant of the silver is $D = 0.023 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ obtained from the measured square resistance $R_\square = 0.023 \Omega$. This gives a Thouless energy $E_T = \hbar D/L^2 = 27 \mu\text{eV}$ for the SNS junction. The control channel is attached at each end to two very large thermal reservoirs. The sample fabrication is described in detail in Refs. [18,19]. By applying a voltage $V_c$, we create a nonthermal quasiparticle energy distribution function $f(E, V_c)$ with a (rounded) double step shape in the center of the silver control channel and, hence, in the normal region of the junction [8,19,20]. The consequence of this is a reduction in magnitude of the critical current and a subsequent transition to a $\pi$ state as a function of $V_c$. The advantage of the SQUID geometry is that it enables one to measure the dependence of $I_{c1}(\phi)$ over the entire range of the phase $\phi$ for different values of $V_c$. The critical current of the SQUID is given by

$$I_{c,\text{SQUID}}(\phi_{\text{ext}}) = I_{c1} + I_{c2}\left(\frac{\pi}{2} + 2\pi\frac{\phi_{\text{ext}}}{\phi_0}\right),$$

where we assume that $I_{c1}$ is reached at $\phi_1 = \frac{\pi}{2}$. Hence, $I_{c,SQUID}(\phi_{\text{ext}})$ represents the supercurrent-phase relation of junction 2 with $\phi_2 = \frac{\pi}{2} + 2\pi\frac{\phi_{\text{ext}}}{\phi_0}$.

In the experiment, performed at 1.4 K, we bias the SQUID (from contacts A to B in Fig. 1) with a low frequency bias current ($f \sim 80 \text{ Hz}$) slightly larger than the critical current. Hence, the modifications of $I_{c,SQUID}(\phi_{\text{ext}})$ are transferred into a voltage signal (with a minus sign) which we measure using a standard lock-in technique as a function of the external magnetic field for different values of $V_c$. The advantage over a dc measurement is a large decrease in noise due to the limited bandwidth. At equilibrium ($V_c = 0$), the critical current of the SQUID is $22 \mu\text{A}, 11 \mu\text{A}$ for each junction [21]. The self-inductance of the SQUID is estimated to be $65 \mu\text{H}$ [19] which yields $(2\pi L_1)/\phi_0 = 2.4$. At $V_c = V_{c,\text{critical}}$, the critical current of the top junction, $I_{c2}$, is strongly suppressed and we are in the limit discussed above: $I_{c1} \gg I_{c2}$ and $(2\pi L_2)/\phi_0 < 1$. The results of the measurements are shown in Fig. 2. The dashed grey line represents the situation where $V_c < V_{c,\text{critical}}$. We observe an almost sinusoidal dependence of the voltage on $\phi_{\text{ext}}$ with a voltage minimum (supercurrent maximum) at $\phi_{\text{ext}} = 0$ indicating that both junctions are in the 0 state. The solid grey line represents the situation at $V_c > V_{c,\text{critical}}$ with a voltage minimum at $\phi_{\text{ext}} = \phi_0/2$ corresponding to a $\pi$ state of junction 2. The black lines represent the situation around the transition ($V_c = V_{c,\text{critical}} = 0.602 \text{ mV}$). The sinusoidal form of the grey curves starts to disappear until we observe a doubling in the periodicity at $V_c = 0.602 \text{ mV}$ shown by the middle curve. Hence, $I_{c2}(\phi_2) = I_{c,\text{transition}}(2\phi_2)$ with $I_{c,\text{transition}} = 70 \text{ nA}$ [22].

![FIG. 1. Controllable $\pi$ SQUID. Two controllable $\pi$ junctions form the weak links of a dc SQUID. Each junction consists of a coplanar Nb-Ag-Nb SNS junction with clean interfaces of which the normal region is coupled to the control channel. The electron distribution in the normal region is modified using $V_c$ causing the transition to a $\pi$ state at sufficiently large values of $V_c$.](image1)

![FIG. 2. Voltage over the SQUID (from contacts A to B in Fig. 1) at a bias current slightly larger than $I_{c,SQUID}$ as a function of the $\phi_{\text{ext}}$ for different values of $V_c$. The amplitudes of the two grey curves are multiplied by 1/10. Around $V_{c,\text{critical}} = 602 \mu\text{V}$, a doubling in periodicity of the voltage oscillations is observed.](image2)
To demonstrate how the energy landscape of the junction evolves around the transition, we can calculate $W(\phi_2)$ using the data presented in Fig. 2 together with Eqs. (1) and (2). The result is shown in Fig. 3 for five values of $V_c$ around $V_c^\text{critical}$. As can be seen, the free energy of the junction evolves smoothly from the situation in which it has one minimum at $\phi = 2\pi n$, via the situation where it has two local minima, to the situation where only the minimum at $\phi = 2\pi(n + 1/2)$ is left. Identical behavior of higher harmonics in the junction at different phases, $J(\phi)$, shown for three different values of the macroscopic phase difference $\phi_2$ in Fig. 4 is the normal state resistance of the junction. The result is shown in Fig. 3 for $\phi_2 = 0.1 \pi$, shown by the dashed line, the positive contributions of $J(\phi)$ shift to higher energies with respect to the solid curve at $\phi = 0.5 \pi$. At $\phi = 0.9 \pi$, a shift to lower energies is observed. The (rounded) double step shape of the energy distribution function implies that $f(E, V_c) \approx 0.5$ in a window $eV_c$ around the Fermi energy, a value which causes the integrand of Eq. (3) to vanish. The value of $V_c$ that creates a form of $f(E, V_c)$ which causes the full integral Eq. (3) to vanish for $\phi = 0.5 \pi$ due to an exact compensation of the (depopulated) positive states with the (almost completely populated) negative states would result in a positive supercurrent in Eq. (3) at $\phi = 0.1 \pi$ and a negative value of the supercurrent at $\phi = 0.9 \pi$ due to the phase dependence of the position of the positive contributions in $J(\phi)$. Hence, the periodicity of the supercurrent-phase relation doubles, resulting in two minima in the junction free energy. This behavior is similar to the prediction for a ballistic SNS junction [2,3].

To be able to compare the observed behavior with the theoretical calculation of $J(\phi)$, we calculate $J(\phi, V_c)$ as a function of inelastic electron-electron and electron-phonon interactions in the control channel. The effective strength of both interaction processes is obtained from a theoretical fit of $I_c(V_c)$ of a single controllable $\pi$ junction with exactly identical control channel and reservoirs as junction 2 (see Ref. [19]). We then calculate $I_{c2}(V_c, \phi_2)$ by means of Eq. (3). We use $E_T$ and the equilibrium critical current of junction 2 $(T_B$ and $V_c = 0)$ $I_{c2,0}$ as fit parameters to obtain a quantitative agreement between the calculation and the data. We find $E_T = 31 \mu$eV and $I_{c2,0}R_n = 17.6 \mu$eV. The result is shown in Fig. 5. We observe that the calculated curves show the same behavior as the measurements. The amplitude of $I_{c2,\text{transition}} = 105$ nA (using $R_n = 1.6 \Omega$), consistent with our previous estimate. The barrier height at the transition can be estimated using $I_{c2,\text{transition}}$ and Eq. (1) to be $108 \mu$eV. Model calculations indicate that an increase in the amplitude of the second harmonic, and, hence, an increase in

FIG. 3. Experimental free energy of junction 2 as a function of $\phi_2$, $W(\phi_2)$, obtained from the data presented in Fig. 2, Eq. (1), and Eq. (2).

FIG. 4. Supercurrent carrying density of states $J(E, \phi)$ for three different values of the macroscopic phase difference $\phi$, using $\Delta/E_T = 0.52$ with $\Delta$ the superconducting gap of the $S$ electrodes and $E$ the energy with respect to the Fermi level. The positive contributions in $J(E, \phi)$ shift to lower energies at higher values of $\phi$. 

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barrier height between the 0 and the $\pi$ state, would be possible by measuring at a lower bath temperature.

In conclusion, we have measured the full supercurrent-phase relation of a controllable $\pi$ junction around its transition and observed a doubling in the periodicity of the supercurrent-phase relation around the transition. This doubling of the periodicity as well as the relative amplitude of the double Josephson current are in good agreement with theoretical predictions. The implication is that the free energy of the junction around the transition evolves as follows. It starts with one minimum at $\phi = 0$ in the 0 state, then, close to the transition, develops a second minimum at $\phi = \pi$. This evolves from a local to a global minimum as the one at $\phi = 0$ slowly vanishes in the $\pi$ state.

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[21] The measurement of $I_c$ of each junction is achieved by measuring $I_c$ of the SQUID while suppressing the $I_c$ of the other junction by applying $V_c$ over its control channel.

The estimation of $I_{c2,\text{transition}}$ is done by a linear interpolation of $I_{c2}$ and $\Delta V_{\text{SQUID}}$: We measured that $I_{c2} = 11 \mu A$ results in $\Delta V_{\text{SQUID}} = 7.8 \mu V$ (at $V_c = 0$), so $\Delta V_{\text{SQUID}} = 0.05 \mu V$ at $V_c = 602 \mu V$ should give $I_{c2,\text{transition}} = 70 nA$. This is correct only in first order, but a better estimate for $I_{c2}$ from the data in Fig. 2 is impossible for several reasons: (i) $\max|I_{c,\text{SQUID}}| - \min|I_{c,\text{SQUID}}|$ depends strongly on the effect of the self-inductance $(2\pi L')/\phi_0$. Moreover, we use a symmetrical bias current so the relation between $\Delta V_{\text{SQUID}}$ and $\max|I_{c,\text{SQUID}}| - \min|I_{c,\text{SQUID}}|$ depends not only on the bias current but also on the fraction $I_{c1}/I_{c2}$ at $(2\pi L')/\phi_0 = 0$. (ii) In the situation around the transition, where $I_{c1} \approx I_{c2} \sin(\phi)$ and $I_{c2,\text{transition}} \approx I_{c2} \sin(2\phi)$, the magnitude of the critical current of the SQUID depends on the current direction. The result is a reduction in the signal which is extremely sensitive to the exact bias current.

We have checked this independently by solving the four-probe system using the boundary conditions derived in Y.V. Nazarov, Superlattices Microstruct. 25, 1221 (1999).