Measurement of CNGS muon neutrino speed with Borexino


a CERN, Geneva, Switzerland
b DIARI–Politecnico di Milano, Piazza Leonardo da Vinci 32, 20133 Milano, Italy
c Dipartimento di Fisica, Università degli Studi e INFN, Milano 20133, Italy
d Chemical Engineering Department, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA
e University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
f INFN–Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso, Assergi 67010, Italy

We have measured the speed of muon neutrinos with the Borexino detector using short-bunch CNGS beams. The final result for the difference in time-of-flight between an \( \langle E \rangle = 17 \) GeV muon neutrino and a particle moving at the speed of light in vacuum is \[ \delta t = 0.8 \pm 0.7_{\text{stat}} \pm 2.9_{\text{sys}} \text{ ns, well consistent with zero.} \]

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1. Introduction

This Letter describes a precise measurement of the speed of CNGS [1] muon neutrinos made with the Borexino\(^1\) [2–4] detector at the Laboratori Nazionali del Gran Sasso (LNGS) in Italy.

CNGS neutrinos travel about 730 km in matter with one of the highest relativistic $\gamma$ factors ever artificially produced. The neutrino mass is at most $\lesssim 2 \text{ eV}/c^2$ or possibly much less, while the CNGS average beam energy is 17 GeV, so $\gamma$ is always $> 10^{19}$, much bigger than that obtained in any charged particle beam. A test of Special Relativity with these particles is therefore meaningful. Besides, the measurement may also put an upper limit on the effect of non-standard propagation of neutrinos in matter.

This effort was also motivated by the claim, made by the OPERA Collaboration in Sep. 2011 [5], that CNGS neutrinos travel faster than the speed of light in vacuum. This claim, however, was later withdrawn [6].

If the mass of the heaviest neutrino is assumed to be $2 \text{ eV}/c^2$, the best direct limit on a neutrino mass, then the relativistic velocity of a 17 GeV neutrino should satisfy $|v/c| \lesssim 10^{-19}$. Cosmological measurements [7] and neutrinoless double beta decay measurements [8] give a mass limit an order of magnitude smaller, implying an even smaller constraint. However, theories with extra dimensions [9] predict apparent velocities different than the speed of light. Some of these theories [10–12] allow $|v/c| \simeq 10^{-4}$ at neutrino energies of a few GeV. The present work has the sensitivity to test these theories and put limits on them.

The MINOS Collaboration has already performed a measurement with the NuMI beam, yielding a result compatible with $c$ with an uncertainty of $\lesssim 10^{-4}$ [13]. A similar measurement was also recently done by the ICARUS Collaboration [14] with a small sample of events collected in the Nov. 2011 CNGS run.

We have been collecting CNGS events since May 2007, when the Borexino experiment started taking data. However, the triggering and time tagging systems originally designed for Borexino [15], while perfectly adequate for solar neutrino physics [16–18] and supernovae detection, were not sufficiently precise to allow an interesting measurement of the neutrino velocity. We have therefore designed and installed a new facility capable of achieving an uncertainty of the order of a few ns. This new facility is based on a small-jitter analogue trigger, a geodetic GPS receiver, and a GPS-time-link. The distance of the SSS from the CNGS proton target was determined by performing a complete geodetic determination of the position in the IGS08 Reference Frame of the underground laboratory and of the Borexino detector in particular. The measurement was done in collaboration with LVD and ICARUS. The position of the CERN target was not measured again. We rely on the precise knowledge of the location of each element of the accelerator already available at CERN.

The Letter is structured as follows: in the next section we describe the measurement of the distance flown by the neutrinos; we then describe the analysis of the data collected in May 2012; for completeness, we also briefly report about the result obtained (with much less precision) in Oct.–Nov 2011. Finally, we report our result.

2. Geodesy

The distance between the Borexino reference point at LNGS and the target at CERN has been computed based on a geodetic survey at Gran Sasso Laboratories and the existing target co-ordinates at CERN.

The geodetic campaign at LNGS was carried out in May 2012 and was performed in two steps. In the first step two GPS networks, one local and one regional, were established. The regional network used in this work consists of 32 GPS permanent stations located between CERN and Gran Sasso (including two antennas at CERN and one at LNGS) whose position in the IGS08 reference frame has been precisely estimated by adjusting (fitting) two weeks of GPS data (Bernese software [21], GPS weeks 1684 and 1685).

A local 9 points GPS network has been monumented (installed) in the Gran Sasso area and framed to the regional one through 3 common stations using a four days-24 hours campaign. In the second step, based on the previously estimated GPS points, a high precision traverse has been measured also by means of gyro-theodolites along the Gran Sasso tunnel highway (10.5 km). This allowed the co-ordinates estimation of the Borexino reference point inside the LNGS.

\(^{1}\)Corresponding address: spokemsperson-borex#lngs.infn.it.
The IGS08 co-ordinates of this point and the related standard deviations are: \((X = 4582.157.919 \text{ m}, Y = 1106.469.341 \text{ m}, Z = 4283.636.931 \text{ m}); (\sigma_X = 0.020 \text{ m}, \sigma_Y = 0.021 \text{ m}, \sigma_Z = 0.015 \text{ m}).\) The co-ordinates and the precision of the target point at CERN, coded as TT41_T_40S, have been supplied by the CERN geodetic team in the ITRF97 reference system. After datum shift to IGS08, the coordinates and the precision of the target point at CERN has been estimated in \(730.472.082 \pm 0.038 \text{ m}.\) The uncertainty should be considered as \(1 \sigma.\)

3. Analysis of May 2012 bunched beam data

A special beam was set up at CERN in May 2012, optimized for the neutrino speed measurement.

The main parameters of this beam are: narrow bunches (\(\sigma \approx 2 \text{ ns}\)), 16 bunches per batch with a bunch separation of \(\approx 100 \text{ ns}\), 4 batches per extraction separated by \(\approx 300 \text{ ns}\); the bunch intensity is \(\approx 10^{11}\) protons; one extraction per CNGS cycle, with a cycle length of 13.2 s.

We have taken data from May 10th until May 24th, 2012. Fig. 1 top shows the cumulative distribution of the delivered protons on target (pots) and the equivalent pots collected by Borexino. The total pots delivered was \(1.944 \times 10^{16}\), out of which \(18.88 \times 10^{16}\) were recorded. The data taking efficiency during this period was 97%. The beam delivery was very stable (see Fig. 1 bottom). The missing data on May 23rd is due to SPS maintenance.

As already mentioned in the introduction, we have collected a total of 291 events of which 144 crossed the SSS. The events were selected by requiring them to be on-time within a window of 100 \(\mu\text{s}\) with respect to the closest CNGS GPS tag plus 2.439 ms, the nominal neutrino time-of-flight.

This large statistics allows us to apply stringent quality cuts and select the best data sample for the measurement. We have chosen not to use the WT only events, because the large size of the tank and the very complex internal geometry makes the full simulation of the light propagation and collection hard. The event sample was further reduced by the requirements of the High Precision Timing Facility (HPTF [19]), which is a purely analogue trigger with a threshold of 100 mV, which corresponds to \(\approx 800 \text{ p.e.}, \text{i.e.} \approx 16 \text{ cm of muon track}.\) This threshold reduces the acceptance of muons when they cross a small segment of the SSS.

Borexino has developed muon reconstruction software capable of determining the location of the entrance point of a muon in the SSS with a precision of about 50 cm. The algorithms make use of the information provided by both the Cherenkov detector, through the identification of the disk-like activation profile of the WT PMTs, and by the scintillator, through a fit of the arrival time distribution of the photons to the SSS PMTs as a function of the track location. For the events used in this Letter, the two results are combined together in a global reconstruction of the entry and exit points of a muon on the SSS. The algorithms and their performance are fully described in [3].

The availability of this reconstruction makes it possible to correct for the spherical shape of the detector, which implies a different time-of-flight for different entrance points.

This correction reduces the size of the data sample because some events cannot be properly reconstructed, but narrows the time distribution significantly, improving the quality of the measurement. After this final reduction, our data set consists of 62 CNGS events, more than enough for a precision measurement.

The HPTF provides the GPS time of each trigger. The time-link between the CERN tagging system and the Borexino HPTF at Gran Sasso has been computed and calibrated by collaborators of the Italian and Spanish institutes of Metrology (INRIM and ROA, respectively) using Precise Point Positioning (PPP) [22] and P3 [23] algorithms, with latter implementing an All-In-View approach [24]. The calibration of the time-link has been achieved with an uncertainty of 1.1 ns, being this the sum of a systematic uncertainty inherent to GPS system and available algorithms with an additional statistical uncertainty of 0.3 ns and 1 ns for the PPP and P3 algorithms, respectively. The procedure adopted to calibrate the HPTF itself and the time-link to CERN is fully described in [19].

Fig. 2 shows the time distribution of the collected events before the folding of the peaks described below. The 98 events in the plot are those that survive a charge cut (\(> 800 \text{ p.e.}, \text{corresponding to approximately 2 MeV equivalent energy deposited in the scintillator}) and that have valid data in the CNGS database.

The time structure and the intensity of the proton bunches are recorded shot by shot through a Beam Current Transformer (BCT).\(^2\)

\(^2\) TT40:BCTFI.400344.
located before the CNGS neutrino target (743.391 \pm 0.002 m upstream).

The signal is acquired by a fast (1 Gs/s) digitizer and stored in a
database. We call this “proton waveform.” Every proton waveform
is time-tagged with respect to the CERN SPS timing system. The
GPS time stamp marks the time of the first sample of the digitized
signal. A detailed description of the CERN timing system and its
calibration is available through public CERN reports [25].

The time stamp associated with each waveform, after correction
by some delays, defines the start time of the velocity measure-
ment. Some of these delays are fixed in time while some of them
are time dependent.

The event distribution in Fig. 2 is folded into a single one by
using the information provided by the BCT digitized waveforms.
After the corrections due to known instrumental delays, the geo-
metrical correction that depends on the muon entrance point, the
subtraction of the expected time-of-flight at speed $c$, and a 2.2 ns
(positive) correction due to the Sagnac effect we obtain the distri-
bution shown in Fig. 3. The distribution of the final sample of 62
events is well centered around zero and has a width of 4.9 ns.

The width of the time-of-flight distribution is well understood.
The light propagation in the detector, the collection of the light by
the PMTs, and the formation of the trigger occur at a time that
depends on the impact parameter of the muon track. Although
we correct for the muon entrance point, the resolution of the re-
construction and the fluctuations in the propagation and in the
collection of the light yield a distribution of finite width. We have
therefore carefully simulated the broadening of the distribution
due to the known effects with both the Geant-4 simulation and
with a dedicated fast Monte Carlo. The result of both simulations
is in good agreement with the data. The width of the arrival time
distribution of the events from Monte Carlo, including light prop-
agation, trigger formation, the jitter of some electronics modules,
and the intrinsic 2 ns width of the bunches is shown in Fig. 3,
overlaid with data. This Monte Carlo predicts a width of 5.1 ns, in
very good agreement with the observed width of 4.9 ns.


In the period from Oct. 21st until Nov. 6th, 2011 the standard
CNGS beam was modified to produce 4 short bunches ($\sigma \approx 2$ ns)
separated by 524 ns. The intensity was 2.5 \times 10^{11} protons per
bunch. In 16 days of operations CERN delivered 7.43 \times 10^{16} pots
which we collected with an overall efficiency of 93% (6.87 \times 10^{16}
pots).

We took data with the standard triggering and GPS tagging sys-
tems, so the precision of this measurement is much lower than
the one obtained in May 2012. In particular, the standard Borex-
inno trigger has a relatively large intrinsic jitter of 32 ns due to the
combined effect of a set of FGPA and a DSP which limit the fi-
nal precision. Besides, the absolute calibration of the GPS receiver
delay in Hall C (ESAT-100 slave) has an uncertainty of a few ns.

The initial sample was made of 116 on-time events selected
using both detectors in a time window of 16 $\mu$s around the nomi-
nal time-of-flight value. After selection of internal detector events,
pile-up removal and quality cuts a sample of 36 events was used to
measure the speed of neutrinos.

We have applied to the final sample an analysis procedure very
similar to that performed for the May 2012. The result is shown in
Fig. 4. As it is clear from the figure, the central value is well
compatible with zero, but the error is much larger than the one
obtained with May 2012 data. The statistical error comes from the
width of the distribution. The systematic error, besides the con-
tributions described in the next section, is bigger because of the
poor knowledge of the ESAT-100 GPS receiver calibration and in-
ternal delays.

5. Results

The final result obtained in May 2012 for the time-of-flight dif-
ference of (E) = 17 GeV muon neutrinos with respect to the speed
of light is $\delta t = 0.8 \pm 0.7_{\text{stat}} \pm 2.9_{\text{sys}}$ ns, consistent with zero. The
we obtain is $\delta = \ldots$ shown in Fig. 3. The systematic error depends on many sources and keep May 2012 data only for the final result. The statistical error comes from the fit to the distribution that are listed and quantified in Table 1.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Error (ns)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time-link calibration (GPS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Borexino electronics delays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delays at CERN</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light propagation in BX detector</td>
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<td>Electronics resolution</td>
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<td>Event selection stability</td>
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<td>Geodesy measurement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total systematic error</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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</table>

The contribution of the University Paris Diderot for this specific measurement is acknowledged.

We also thank and acknowledge the Geodetic Survey Division (GSD) of Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), for providing the PPP software and the Time Section of the Royal Observatory of Belgium (ROB) for providing the P3 software. Special thanks to F. Lahaye (NRCan) and P. Defraigne (ROB) for the kind support and helpful advice provided on the usage of PPP and P3 software.

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### References