Brief Papers

Emulation of spike-timing dependent plasticity in nano-scale phase change memory

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A B S T R A C T

The spike-timing dependent plasticity (STDP) of biological synapses, which is known to be a function of the formulated Hebbian learning rule of human cognition, learning and memory abilities, was emulated with two-phase change memory (2-PCM) cells built with 39 nm technology. For this, we designed a novel time-modulated voltage (TMV) scheme for changing the conductance of 2-PCM cells, that could produce both long-term potentiation (LTP) and long-term depression (LTD) by applying variable (decreasing/increasing) pulse voltages according to the sign and magnitude in time interval between pre- and post-spikes. Since such schemes can be easily modified to have a variety of pulse shapes and time intervals between pulses, it is expected to be a proper scheme for designing diverse synaptic connection abilities. In addition, the small form factor and low energy consumption of 2-PCM make them comparable to biological synapses, which makes phase change memory a promising candidate for electronic synapses in large-scale neuronomorphic system applications.

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1. Introduction

The term neuromorphic engineering, which was coined by Carver Mead \cite{1}, has given rise to significant progress in the uprising application fields of brain-inspired computing, smart sensors, and associate memory, which is based on CMOS analog, digital and/or combined circuits, called silicon neural networks (SiNs). These networks mimic the information processing pathways of biological neurons such as signal reception, propagation, transference to neighboring neurons, and storage \cite{2-4}.

Fig. 1(a) shows a schematic of biological neurons and the synapses in-between, where it is known that signal receipt and transmission are achieved by the generation of action potentials in soma and its propagation along the axons of the neuron, respectively (neuron spiking). Meanwhile, signal transfer and storage are determined by the connection strength of the synapses between neurons (synaptic plasticity). In particular, synaptic plasticity, or the change in synapse connectivity, is widely believed to underlie our learning processes and memory. Though there have been some reports \cite{5-7} of mimicking synaptic plasticity using SiNs, they are somewhat inappropriate for practical use in large scale neuronomorphic applications, because of the large consumption of area and power of complicated circuits.

Following the famous hypothesis of a Canadian psychologist \cite{8} on synaptic plasticity, it is expected that the connectivity in between synapses will change plastically when two neighboring neurons spike temporally together. A representative algorithm for such a hypothesis is briefly depicted using three neurons in Fig. 1 (a), synaptic strengths may change depending on the relative timing of pre- and post-synaptic spikes. The synaptic strength is potentiated (or strengthened) if pre-spike A precedes post-spike B ($\Delta t > 0$) whereas it is depressed (or weakened) if pre-spike A follows post-spike C ($\Delta t < 0$). Such a timing algorithm in synaptic strength’s modification or change is called spike-timing dependent plasticity (STDP) \cite{2}. In other words, the change in synapse strength ($\Delta C$) is positive (the synaptic connectivity is potentiated) when $\Delta t > 0$, and it becomes higher at smaller $\Delta t$, which is called long-term potentiation (LTP). Meanwhile, $\Delta C$ is negative (the synaptic connectivity is depressed) when $\Delta t < 0$ and it becomes more negative at smaller negative $\Delta t$, which is long-term depression (LTD), as seen in Fig. 1(b).

In this study, we introduce a novel scheme for emulating STDP which is easily applicable to any nano-scale memory device when...
if having analog resistance behavior with respect to external stimuli. For an experimental verification of this scheme, we emulated STDPs in two-phase change memory (2-PCM) cells made with 39 nm technology by introducing a novel time-modulated voltage (TMV) pulse scheme. Various STDP shapes can be easily obtained by varying the shape of voltage pulses and the time interval between two cells, which helps to design diverse synaptic connection abilities.

2. Concept for STDP emulation in two resistive memory cells

To emulate the STDP of one synapse, we can take into account two resistive memory cells which are connected to pre-synaptic and post-synaptic neurons through their respective bit lines, as shown in Fig. 2(a). One is a reference cell with a fixed resistance and the other is a control cell with variable resistances. After the reset initialization for two cells to be high resistance, independent voltage pulses called set pulses are applied, based on the intrinsic $R$–$V$ curve of Fig. 2(b), to reduce the resistance of the two cells. It should be designed that the set voltage is fixed for the reference cell ($V_{\text{ref}}$) to have always an intermediate resistance whereas the set voltage to control cell ($V_{\text{cont}}$) is modulated to have various resistance levels so that the two cells have different resistance values with respect to the time interval between the spikes of the pre-synaptic and post-synaptic neurons ($\Delta t$). As depicted in Fig. 2(c), in the case of $\Delta t > 0$, $V_{\text{cont}}$ is set to be inversely proportional to $\Delta t$ whereas in the case of $\Delta t < 0$, $V_{\text{cont}}$ is set to be proportional to $\Delta t$. Then, when the reciprocal of the resistance difference of the two cells is considered as the conductance change ($\Delta C$) and it is plotted with $\Delta t$, we can obtain an STDP shape.

3. Experiment

For a representative demonstration of the scheme suggested above, we emulated STDP behaviors by making use of two PCM cells, using state-of-the-art 39 nm technology. As shown in Fig. 3(a), a PCM cell has a p–n diode switch epitaxially grown on an N+ Si word line (WL), ring-type bottom electrode (BE), a damascene-type Ge2Sb2Te5 (GST) phase change material, line-type top electrode (TE) and bit line (BL). Fig. 3(b) represents the circuit diagram of 2-PCM cells with two-channel pulse generator which can generate two independent pulses with a time interval as precise as 10 ns. In addition, Fig. 3(c) and (d) depict the block diagram of a programming algorithm, and the detailed pulse conditions and their expected resistance change with respect to the sign of $\Delta t$.

First, both reference and control cells have high resistance values of several M$\Omega$ ($R_{\text{init}}$), using an initial short pulse of 5 V height with a 10 ns-rise, 80 ns-duration, and 10 ns-fall. Then, we make a reference cell to induce a few hundred k$\Omega$ ($R_{\text{ref}}$) by applying the fixed voltage of 5 V with a 100 ns-rise, 50 ns-duration, and 100 ns-fall widths at time $t_0$. Next, we apply a time-modulated voltage (TMV) at time $t_0 + \Delta t$ for a control cell to have various resistance values ($R_{\text{cont}}$) according to the sign and magnitude of $\Delta t$. Here, we use a 5 V – (5 V/$R_{\text{max}}$) × $\Delta t$ pulse height as a TMV example under the same pulse widths and repeat to write a control cell with an increase of $\Delta t$ from 1 ms to 20 ms, as described in Fig. 3(c).

4. Emulation of STDP in two-phase change memory cells

Fig. 4(a) shows resistance changes in reference and control cells ($R_{\text{ref}}$ and $R_{\text{cont}}$) with respect to $\Delta t$, which has resulted from the
programming algorithms presented in Fig. 3(c). $R_{\text{ref}}$ has a resistance of 100 kΩ–500 kΩ irrespective of $\Delta t$, which is due to the fixed pulse condition. Some fluctuations in $R_{\text{ref}}$ are attributed to the stochastic crystalline states, which are often observed when set write operations are repeated in the phase change memory while targeting an intermediate resistance level [9]. On the other hand, $R_{\text{cont}}$ is similar to $R_{\text{ref}}$ for small $|\Delta t|$, but is abruptly increased to 2 MΩ–6 MΩ (in the case of $\Delta t > 0$) or decreased to 5 kΩ–20 kΩ (in the case of $\Delta t < 0$) at large $|\Delta t|$, according to the time-modulated pulse schemes, as expected in Fig. 3(d). Since the difference ($\Delta R = R_{\text{cont}} - R_{\text{ref}}$) of the two cells can be extracted and its reciprocal can be regarded as $\Delta C$ in 2-PCM synapses, a high $|\Delta C|$ can be achieved at small $|\Delta t|$, whereas a

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**Fig. 3.** (a) A cross sectional transmission electron microscope image of phase change memory cells made with 39 nm technology. (b) Circuit diagram of 2-PCM cells with two-channel pulse generators. If $V_{\text{ref}}$ is applied to the reference cell at a specific time ($t_0$), then $V_{\text{cont}}$ is applied to the control cell at $t_0 + \Delta t$. (c) Block diagram of the programming algorithm. (d) Detailed pulse conditions for STDP emulation in 2-PCM cells and their expected resistance changes with respect to the sign of $\Delta t$.

**Fig. 4.** (a) Resistance changes of the reference and control cells with respect to $\Delta t$. (b) Step-like LTP and LTD behaviors are realized in 2-PCM cells by the programming algorithm of Fig. 3(c), where they are fitted by step-like functions.
low |ΔC| is achieved at high |Δt|. Accordingly, STDP behaviors can be observed when ΔC is plotted as a function of Δt, as shown in Fig. 4(b).

We can fit such STDP behaviors into 2-PCM cells by a step-function of Eq. (1), where a and c are scaling parameters, τ is the characteristic time when ΔC changes abruptly and b is a fitting parameter. That is, ΔC is a – c when Δt approaches zero whereas it becomes c when Δt is much larger than τ, as touched upon in Eq. (1). In Fig. 4(b), a and c are 1.5 and 0.5, τ is 12 ms, and b is 4.0 × 10⁻⁴ for LTP fitting while a and c are −1.6 and −0.5, τ is −11 ms, and b is −5.5 × 10⁻⁴ for LTD fitting. It is thought that the step-like STDP in our study has to do with the percolation behaviors in the crystallization process of amorphous phase change material and it needs further study. On the other hand, these step-like shapes are somewhat deviated from biological standard shapes [as in Fig. 1(b)] but they belong to the F2 category when an action potential of pre-synaptic neurons has an asymmetric rectangular shape [5].

\[
\Delta C = \frac{a}{e^{b - \tau/b}} + c = \begin{cases} 
\frac{a + c}{e^{b - \tau/b}} & \text{if } \Delta t < -\tau \\
\frac{a + c}{e^{b - \tau/b}} + \frac{c}{e^{b - \tau/b}} & \text{if } \Delta t = -\tau \\
\frac{a + c}{e^{b - \tau/b}} + \frac{c}{e^{b - \tau/b}} & \text{if } \Delta t > -\tau 
\end{cases}
\]  

(1)

We examine how the pulse shape affects the LTP behaviors in 2-PCM cells. The set pulses that induce the crystallization of initially amorphous region not to melt fully or when the falling time is too short to quench set pulses are not enough to crystallize, especially when the pulse has to do with the biological standard shapes [as in Fig. 1(b)].

Kuzum et al. [14] demonstrated various STDP behaviors in one phase change memory cell by applying positive voltage chain pulses in the forwards direction and a single negative voltage pulse backwards, but the pulses are somewhat complicated in the management of pulse shape and directionality. Suri et al. [15] introduced two-phase change memory cells that can play specific roles in flowing LTP and LTD currents, but they require a large area for cell-selecting transistors and extra current comparator circuits. Eryilmaz et al. [16] presented a 10 × 10 array of phase change synaptic devices that showed simple pattern learning and recognition abilities, but they had to use one metal-oxide-semiconductor (MOS) switch per synaptic device. Relatively, the 2-PCM synaptic device in this work has the advantages of using a simple pulse pattern and smaller device size over the above-mentioned reports because it makes use of single set pulses and vertical-type diode switches with no area penalty for the device size.

The signal transmission in a biological neuron is mostly unidirectional from pre-synaptic to post-synaptic neurons, where it shows electric features at the axons in pre-synaptic neurons, it turns into chemical characteristics at the synapse, and it returns the electric mode at the dendrite of the post-synaptic neuron [4]. The changes in synaptic connectivity are correlated with the time difference between the pre-synaptic and post-synaptic spikes of the STDP algorithms [5]. The 2-PCM in this study follows such unidirectional features and shows deterministic synaptic plasticity of biological neurons as demonstrated in Figs. 3 and 4. It should also be mentioned that this 2-PCM synaptic device needs extra circuits: Time interval counters and synapse selector/generators to measure the time differences between the pre- and post-spike and to modulate conductance, respectively, unlike a biological synapse where the synaptic strength is varied in-vivo in the course of electro-chemical processes in synapse cleft. The required energy for one synaptic event is 200 pJ – 300 pJ in this 2-PCM synapse with 39 nm technology, which is higher than that of biological synapses (1 pJ – 10 pJ). However, it can be at least reduced to tens of pJ when adopting a sub-10 nm technology phase change memory device [20] and high-speed phase change materials with eutectic Sb₂Te₃-based [21] or Sb-based [22] compositions.

6. Conclusion

Low power consumption, small form factor, and high reliability are prerequisites to emulate the spike-timing dependent plasticity (STDP) for biological synapses in large-scale neuromorphic systems. For this, we have proposed a novel scheme for emulating STDP in analog resistive memory devices and we...
emulated its behavior in 2-PCM synaptic devices made with 39 nm phase change memory cells by applying time-modulated voltage (TMV) pulses. It is observed that control of the duration and falling times in slow-quenched set pulses are effective for obtaining various LTP shapes. In addition, it is demonstrated that the synaptic transfer time can be reduced to as little as hundreds of nanoseconds that is much faster than biological or conventional SiNs synapses. Thus, the 2-PCM synapse in this study is very likely to have advantages for high-speed, high-capacity neuromorphic applications, which enables mass-production-level phase change memory to be a strong candidate for electronic synapses.

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**References**

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