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SUPERCONDUCTIVITY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS, MECHANISMS AND MODERN APPLICATIONS

Sh. R. Uralov
Physics Teacher Tashkent State University of Law
Samarkand Branch Academic Lyceum

ABSTRACT

This article examines the physical nature of superconductivity, its microscopic mechanisms, and its applications in modern technologies. It highlights the historical discovery of superconductivity as well as its fundamental characteristics, such as zero electrical resistance and the Meissner effect. Within the framework of BCS theory, the formation of Cooper pairs and the emergence of an energy gap are discussed as key factors governing the transition of materials into the superconducting phase. Differences between type-I and type-II superconductors—including the roles of London penetration depth, coherence length, and Abrikosov vortices—are scientifically analyzed. The article also explores the properties of high-temperature superconductors and the contemporary hypotheses regarding their mechanisms. Additionally, the practical use of superconducting materials in MRI systems, quantum computers, magnetic levitation transport, and energy transmission technologies is reviewed. The study substantiates the fundamental significance of superconductivity and highlights its future scientific and technological potential.

KEYWORDS

Superconductivity; BCS theory; Cooper pairs; Meissner effect; energy gap; critical temperature; type-I superconductors; type-II superconductors; high-temperature superconductors; phonons; Abrikosov vortices; quantum devices; Josephson junction; magnetic levitation; MRI technology.

Introduction

Superconductivity is a unique quantum phenomenon in which certain materials, when cooled to very low temperatures, exhibit zero electrical resistance and completely expel magnetic fields through the Meissner effect. First observed in 1911 by H. Kamerlingh Onnes in mercury (Hg), this phenomenon has since become one of the most important research directions in modern physics, materials science, and engineering. The exceptional properties of superconductors have enabled broad applications not only in fundamental physics but also in practical technologies such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), quantum computing, energy-efficient transmission lines, and highly sensitive magnetic sensors.

This article provides a scientific overview of the physical foundations of superconductivity, the BCS theory, the characteristics of high-temperature superconductors, relevant experimental findings, and modern application fields.

Historical Discovery and Key Characteristics of Superconductivity

Kamerlingh Onnes’ Experiment

In 1911, H. Kamerlingh Onnes observed that the electrical resistance of mercury dropped abruptly to nearly zero when cooled to approximately 4.2 K. This behavior could not be explained using classical electron-gas models of the time, implying the existence of an entirely new physical mechanism. Subsequent studies revealed that many other elements also possess superconducting transition temperatures.

Fundamental Properties of Superconductors

Two core effects characterize superconductivity:

1. **Zero electrical resistance** — An electric current can flow indefinitely through a superconductor without energy dissipation. In ideal conditions, such a current may persist eternally.
2. **Meissner–Ochsenfeld effect** — A superconductor expels external magnetic fields from its interior. This property distinguishes superconductors from perfect conductors and confirms that superconductivity represents a thermodynamic phase transition.

Microscopic Theory of Superconductivity (BCS Model)

Essence of BCS Theory

The first comprehensive explanation of superconductivity was presented in 1957 by J. Bardeen, L. Cooper, and R. Schrieffer. According to the BCS theory, superconductivity arises from the pairing of electrons mediated by phonons, resulting in the formation of Cooper pairs.

Cooper pairs possess the following properties:

- Combined charge of **2e**
- Opposite momenta
- Opposite spins
- Formation of an **energy gap** in the electronic spectrum

These paired electrons form a macroscopic quantum state with a unified phase, enabling resistance-free current flow.

Energy Gap

In the BCS model, the superconducting transition is accompanied by the emergence of an energy gap Δ in the electronic spectrum. This gap stabilizes Cooper pairs against thermal disruptions, giving rise to the concept of the critical temperature TcT_cTc. The energy gap thus plays a central role in maintaining the superconducting state.

Type-I and Type-II Superconductors

Type-I Superconductors

Many elemental metals (such as Pb, Hg, and Al) belong to this category. They have low critical magnetic fields, and once the external magnetic field exceeds the critical value, superconductivity collapses abruptly throughout the entire material.

Type-II Superconductors

Investigated extensively after 1935, type-II superconductors (e.g., NbTi, Nb_3Sn, and ceramic-based oxides) can maintain superconductivity under much stronger magnetic fields. They are characterized by:

- London penetration depth
- Coherence length
- Formation of Abrikosov flux vortices

These quantized magnetic flux lines allow type-II superconductors to remain superconducting even in high magnetic fields.

High-Temperature Superconductors

Discovery and Development

The discovery of superconductivity in ceramic oxides by Bednorz and Müller in 1986 marked a turning point in condensed matter physics. These materials exhibited transition temperatures above 30 K. Later, compounds such as $YBa_2Cu_3O_{7-\delta}$ (YBCO) achieved transition temperatures near 92 K, enabling cooling with liquid nitrogen.

Mechanism Challenges

The microscopic mechanism of high-temperature superconductivity is not fully explained by the classical BCS model. In these materials, phonon interactions play a limited role, while electron-electron correlations, spin fluctuations, and complex many-body quantum effects are considered significant. This remains one of the most challenging open problems in modern physics.

Applications of Superconductivity

Medical Technology: MRI Systems

MRI machines utilize superconducting magnets typically made from NbTi alloys. Their ability to carry current without energy loss ensures stable and powerful magnetic fields.

Maglev Trains

Superconducting magnets generate strong magnetic levitation forces that allow trains to float above the tracks, reducing friction and enabling speeds of up to 500 km/h.

Quantum Computing

Superconducting Josephson junctions serve as qubits, capable of maintaining stable macroscopic quantum states at very low temperatures.

Energy Transmission and Magnetic Sensors

Superconducting cables significantly reduce energy losses during transmission. SQUID sensors based on superconducting loops detect extremely small variations in magnetic fields.

Conclusion

Superconductivity is a quantum-mechanical phenomenon that enables resistance-free electrical conduction, the creation of strong magnetic fields, and the advancement of quantum technologies. The discovery of high-temperature superconductors has greatly expanded the practical prospects of the field. Despite more than a century of research, many questions about the mechanisms of superconductivity remain open, and the search for new materials and applications continues to be one of the most active areas of modern physics.

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