EPFL

Génie Electrique et Electronique
Master Program
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EE-557
Semiconductor devices I

Carrier Generation and Recombination

Outline of the lecture

1. Electrons photons and phonons
2. Carrier generation and recombination
3. Dynamics and lifetimes

Read Chapter 1 and 3 of the reference book

References:

- J. A. del Alamo, course materials for 6.720J Integrated Microelectronic Devices, Spring 2007. MIT OpenCourseWare (http://ocw.mit.edu/)

Carrier Generation and Recombination

Key questions

What are the physical mechanisms that result in generation and recombination of electrons and holes?

What happens to the balance between generation and recombination when carrier concentrations are perturbed from thermal equilibrium values?

Key points

In thermal equilibrium:

- Carrier concentration only depends on band structure, dopant and temperature. Nothing to do with carrier generation and recombination
- However, the dynamics of semiconductor devices depend on generation and recombination rates

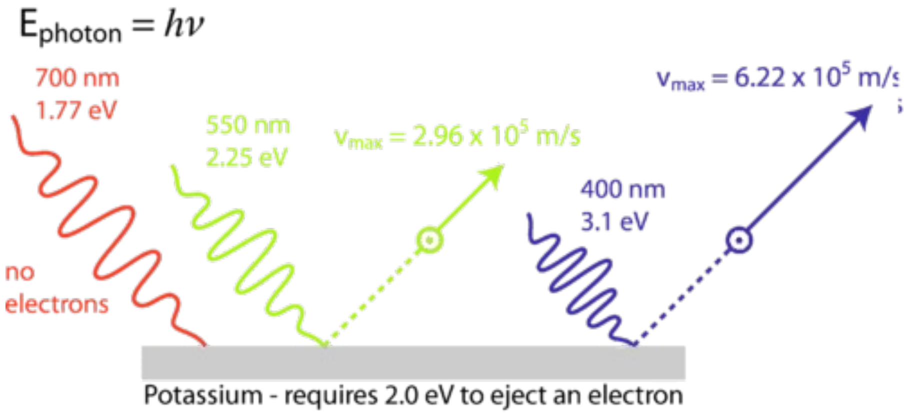
Phonons, Photons and Electrons

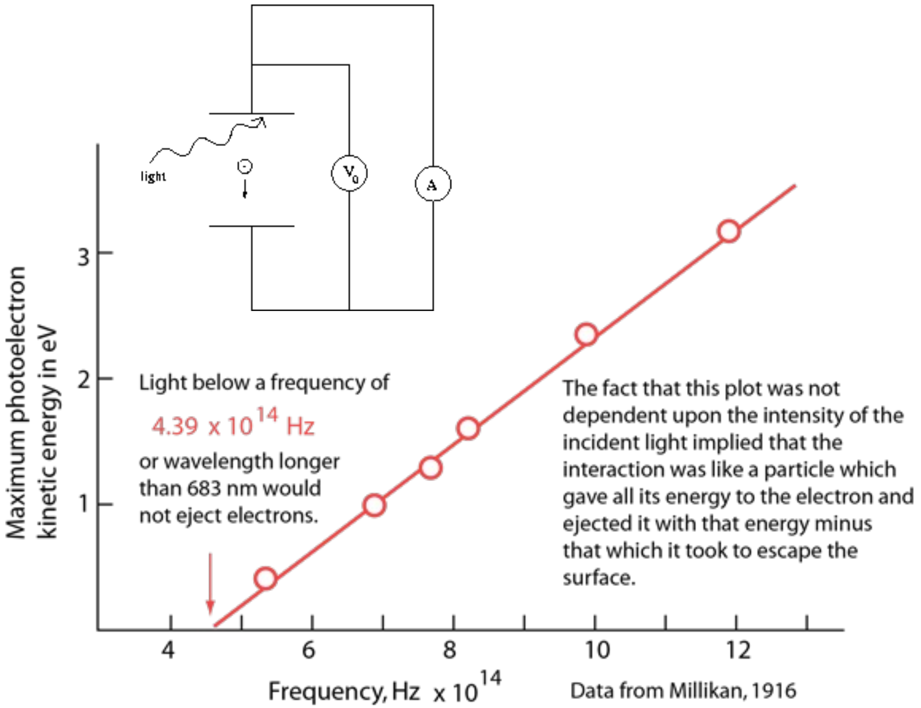
Photons

$$E_{photon} = h\nu = \hbar\omega$$

The frequency of photons, which defines their color, determines their energy

Photo-electric effect





Photons have large λ (400 – 700 nm for the visible light)

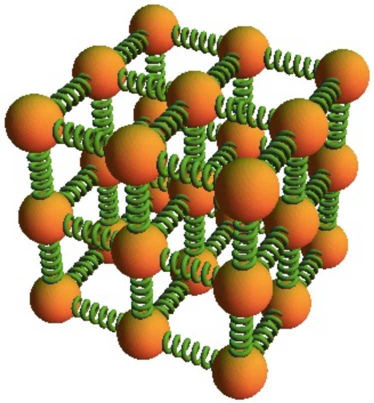
Kinetic energy of photo-generated electrons:

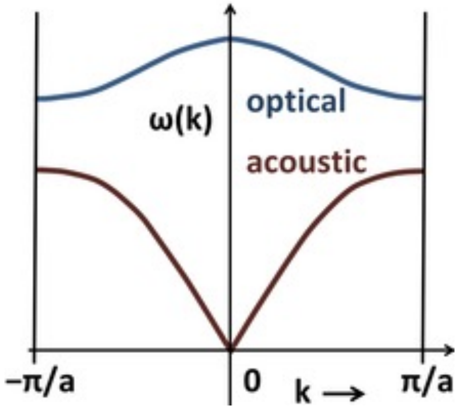
- Independent on intensity of light
- There is a threshold frequency that depends on the metal work function

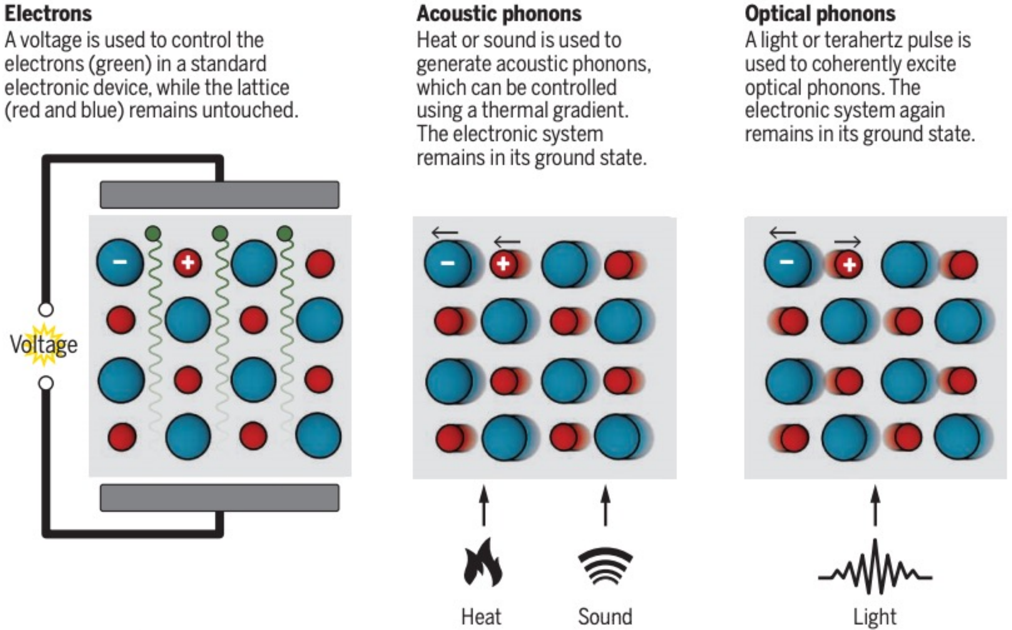
Photons are particles with **large energy** and **very small momentum**, thus they can change significantly the energy, not the momentum of electrons

Phonons, Photons and Electrons

Phonons: Collective vibration of the atoms in a solid (coupled system)







Electrons
A voltage is used to control the electrons (green) in a standard electronic device, while the lattice (red and blue) remains untouched.

Acoustic phonons
Heat or sound is used to generate acoustic phonons, which can be controlled using a thermal gradient. The electronic system remains in its ground state.

Optical phonons
A light or terahertz pulse is used to coherently excite optical phonons. The electronic system again remains in its ground state.

D. M. Juraschek, N. A. Spaldin, ***Science*** 2017

- Quantized nature of the vibration energy: vibration modes = phonons
- If electrons donate energy to the lattice: emission of a phonon
- If the lattice donates energy to the electron: absorption of a phonon

Energy of optical phonons:

    - Si: 63 meV
    - GaAs: 35 meV
    - GaN: 92 meV

Which are much smaller than the band gap, but their momentum can be very large.

The density of optical phonons is much larger than that of acoustic phonons.

In summary:

- **Photons**: have large energy and very small momentum, thus they can change significantly the energy, not the momentum of electrons

  Energy of **visible** photons: 1.7 - 3.2eV
  (of course UV photons have larger energy, and IR photons smaller than this range)

- **Phonons**: have small energy and very large momentum, thus they can change significantly the momentum, not the energy of electrons

  Energy of **optical phonons**:
    - Si: 63 meV
    - GaAs: 35 meV
    - GaN: 92 meV

Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

We will see the following mechanisms for band-to-band generation and recombination:

1. Thermal: negligible
2. Optical
3. Auger
4. Trap-assisted

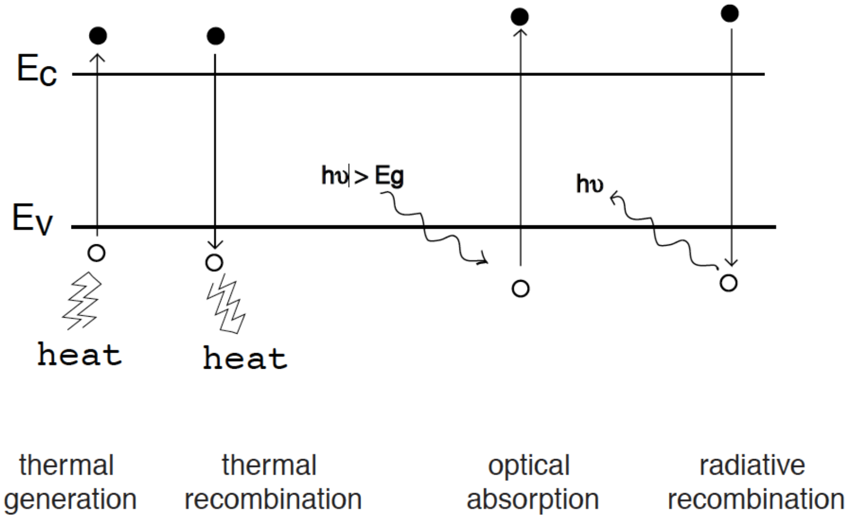
And some that are induced by **strong electric fields**:

- Impact ionization
- Tunneling

Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

Thermal and Optical generation and recombination:

Semiconductors are highly dynamic systems: electrons are continuously being generated and recombined.



In thermal equilibrium, there is a dynamic balance between these events

Phonons (thermal): covalent bond is ruptured by thermal vibrations in the lattice

energy of phonons (0.06 eV) is much smaller than the band gap (1.1eV)

Very unlikely process as this requires many phonons simultaneously

Photons (optical):

- photon delivers enough energy to break a covalent bond: **optical absorption**
- photon is emitted when an electron recombines with a hole:

Radiative recombination: Basis for optoelectronic devices

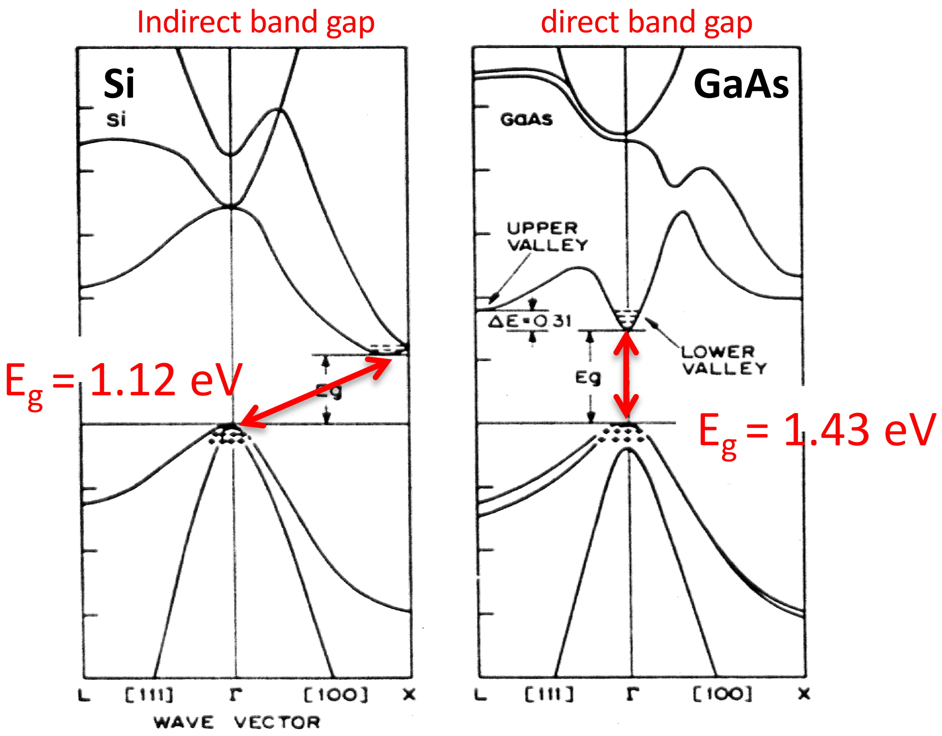
Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

Electrons and holes: have energy and momentum since they have mass and are moving around atoms

Photons: have zero rest mass and always move at the speed of light within vacuum

Direct band gap: momentum can be conserved
photon emission is a likely process, thus takes place at **high rates**

Indirect band gap: a third particle is required, such as a phonon, in addition to a photon
photon emission is much less likely: **small rates**



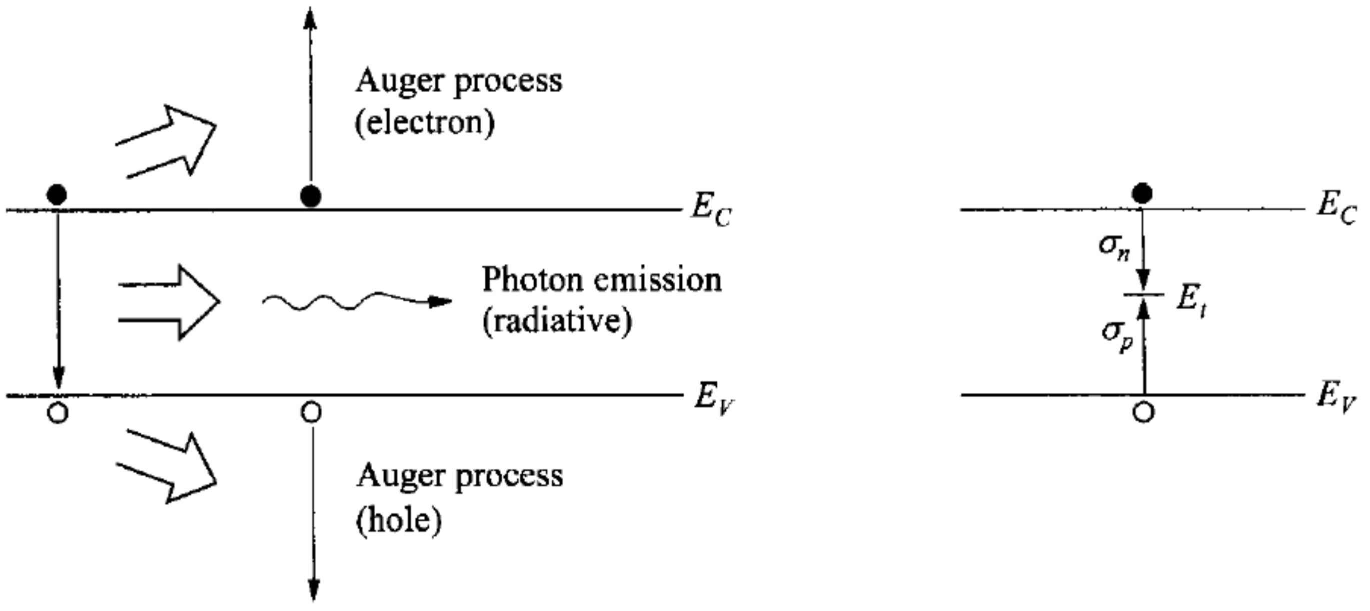
Radiative recombination:

- Unlikely in Si, ”indirect” bandgap material, since it needs a phonon to conserve momentum
- More likely in III-Vs semiconductors
- It is a 2-particle process (proportional to *np*)

Summary of mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

Band-to-band recombination

Recombination through single-level traps
(nonradiative)



(a) (b)

Band-to-band electron-hole recombination: energy of an electron in transition from the conduction band to the valence band is conserved by **emission of a photon (radiative process)** or by **transfer of the energy** to another free electron or hole (**Auger process**).

Inverse processes of **direct optical absorption**, and **impact ionization.**

Band-to-band transitions are more probable for direct-band gap semiconductors, which are more common among III-V compounds

Carrier Generation and Recombination

Thermal equilibrium: principle of detailed balance

Define:

$G_i \equiv$ generation rate by process i $[cm^{-3}\, s^{-1}]$
$R_i \equiv$ recombination rate by process i $[cm^{-3}\, s^{-1}]$
$G \equiv$ total generation rate $[cm^{-3}\, s^{-1}]$
$R \equiv$ total recombination rate $[cm^{-3}\, s^{-1}]$

In thermal equilibrium:

$$R_o = \Sigma R_{oi} = G_o = \Sigma G_{oi}$$

Principle of Detailed Balance:

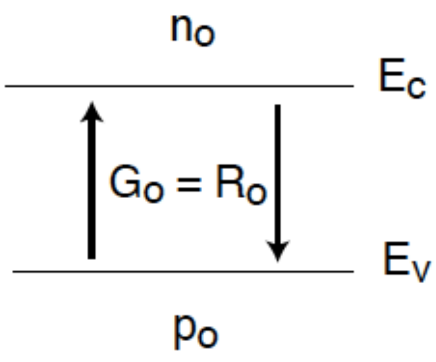
In the presence of several paths for G & R, each has to balance out in detail:

$$R_{oi} = G_{oi} \qquad \text{for all } i$$

Generation and Recombination

In thermal equilibrium:

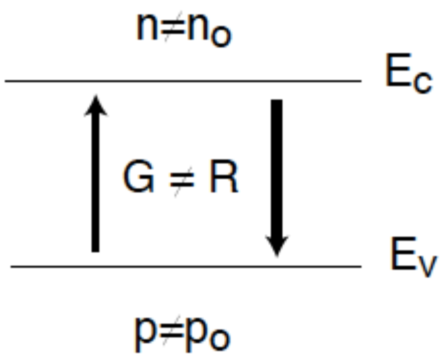
$$\begin{aligned} n &= n_o \\ p &= p_o \\ G_{oi} &= R_{oi} \\ G_o &= R_o \end{aligned}$$



thermal equilibrium

Out of thermal equilibrium (carrier concentrations disturbed from thermal equilibrium):

$$\begin{aligned} n &\neq n_o \\ p &\neq p_o \\ G_i &\neq R_i \\ G &\neq R \end{aligned}$$



outside thermal equilibrium

Generation and Recombination

We define *net recombination rate*, *U*:

$$U = R - G$$

Reflects imbalance between internal G&R mechanisms:

- if $R > G \;\rightarrow\; U > 0$, net recombination prevails
- if $R < G \;\rightarrow\; U < 0$, net generation prevails
- if $R = G \;\rightarrow\; U = 0$, thermal equilibrium

If there are several mechanisms acting simultaneously, we define:

$$U_i = R_i - G_i$$

$$U = \Sigma U_i$$

What happens to the G&R rates of the various mechanisms outside thermal equilibrium?

Band-to-band Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Optical Generation and Recombination

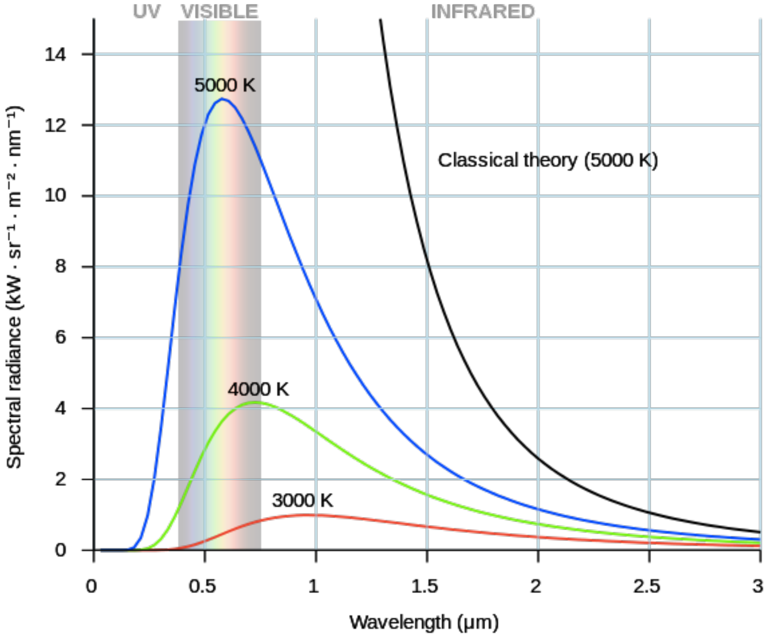
At finite T, semiconductor is immersed in ”bath” of blackbody radiation ⇒ optical generation

Plenty of bonds available and only a small number are broken at any one time

G ⇒ depends only on T:

$$G_{o,rad} = g_{rad}(T)$$

(G: generation of carriers, not photons)



Black-body radiation is the thermal electromagnetic radiation within or surrounding a body in thermodynamic equilibrium with its environment

A recombination process demands one electron and one hole

R ⇒ depends on $n_o p_o$:

$$R_{o,rad} = r_{rad}(T)\; n_o p_o$$

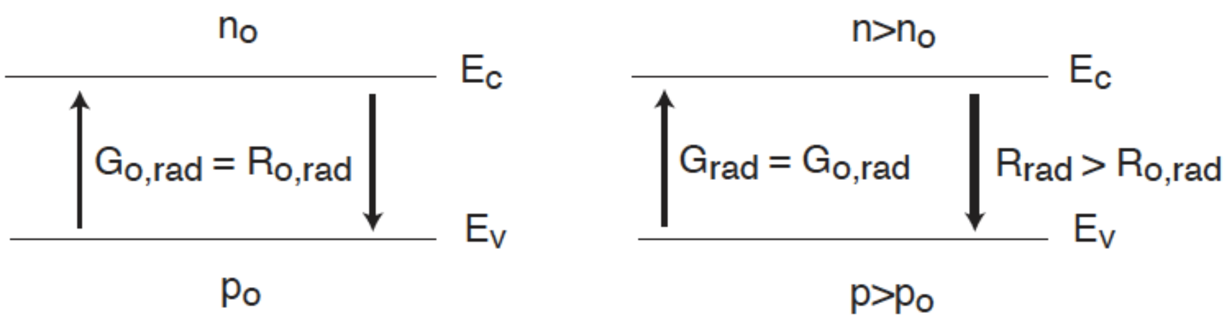
$r_{rad}(T)$ is a rate constant that depends on materials and temperature

In TE, detailed balance implies:

$$g_{rad} = r_{rad} n_o p_o = r_{rad} n_i^2$$

Generation and Recombination out of equilibrium

Optical



thermal equilibrium with excess carriers

Optical generation rate unchanged since number of available bonds unchanged:

$$G_{rad} = g_{rad} = r_{rad} n_o p_o$$

Optical recombination rate affected if electron and hole concentrations have changed:

$$R_{rad} = r_{rad} np$$

Define *net recombination rate*:

$$\boxed{U_{rad} = R_{rad} - G_{rad} = r_{rad}(np - n_o p_o)}$$

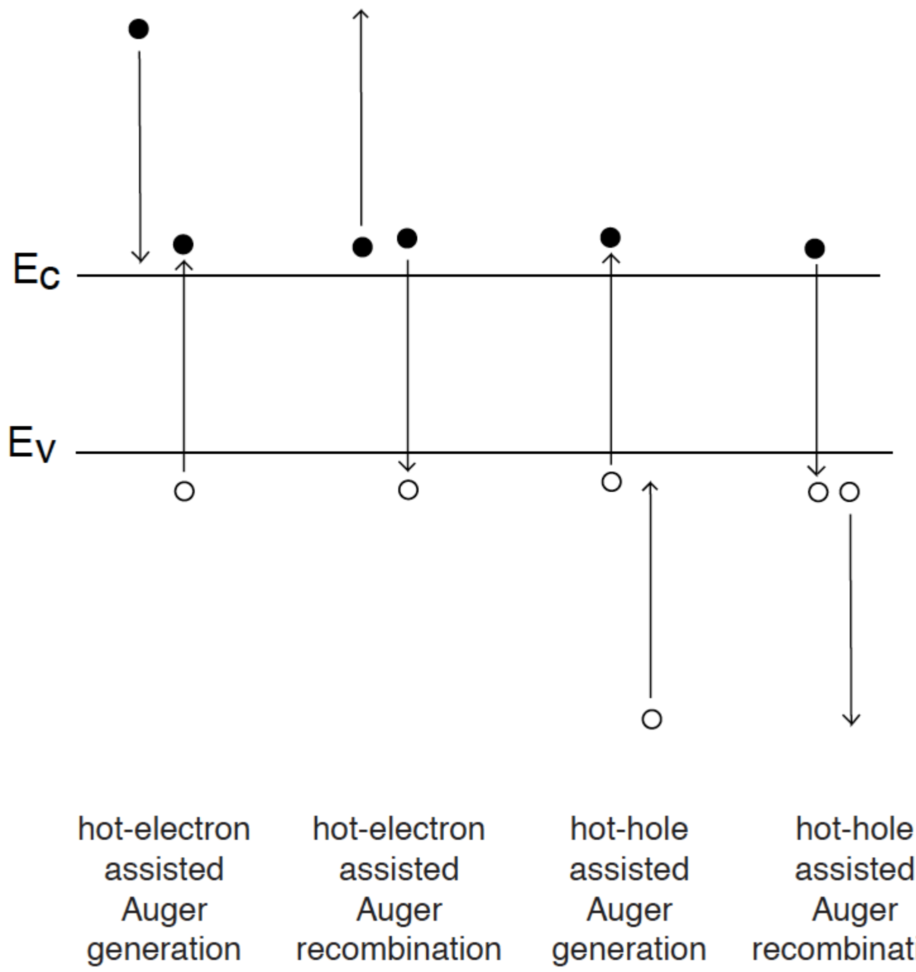
Proportional to: (carrier concentration)^2

– if $np > n_o p_o$, $U_{rad} > 0$, net recombination prevails

– if $np < n_o p_o$, $U_{rad} < 0$, net generation prevails

Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

Auger recombination:



Auger generation: energy provided by ”hot” carrier

Auger recombination:

- 3-particle process (proportional to np^2 or pn^2)
- energy given to third carrier; **needs lots of carriers**;

Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Auger Generation and Recombination

Involving hot electrons (energetic electrons):

The more electrons there are, the more likely it is to have hot ones capable of Auger generation:

$$G_{o,eeh} = g_{eeh}(T)n_o$$

Hot electrons are the fraction of n_o at the tail of the distribution

A recombination event demands ***two* electrons and *one* hole**: 3-particle collision

A second electron absorbs the energy released from an electron-hole recombination.

$$R_{o,eeh} = r_{eeh}n_o^2p_o$$

In TE, detailed balance implies:

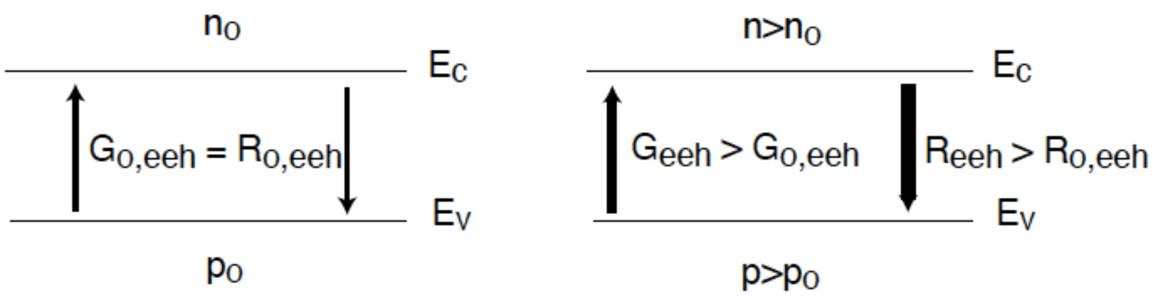
$$g_{eeh} = r_{eeh}n_op_o$$

Involving hot holes: similar but substitute n_o for p_o and *eeh* by *ehh* above.

Auger recombination and generation rates can become **significant under high carrier concentration**

Generation and Recombination out of equilibrium

Auger


n_o E_c $G_{o,eeh} = R_{o,eeh}$ E_v p_o

$n>n_o$ E_c $G_{eeh} > G_{o,eeh}$ $R_{eeh} > R_{o,eeh}$ E_v $p>p_o$

thermal equilibrium

with excess carriers

$$G_{eeh} = g_{eeh} n$$

$$R_{eeh} = r_{eeh} n^2 p$$

If relationship between g_{eeh} and r_{eeh} unchanged from TE:

$$U_{eeh} = R_{eeh} - G_{eeh} = r_{eeh} n (np - n_o p_o)$$

$$\boxed{U_{ehh} = r_{ehh} p (np - n_o p_o)}$$

Proportional to:
(carrier concentration)^3

It is similar involving **hot holes,** thus the total Auger net recombination rate is:

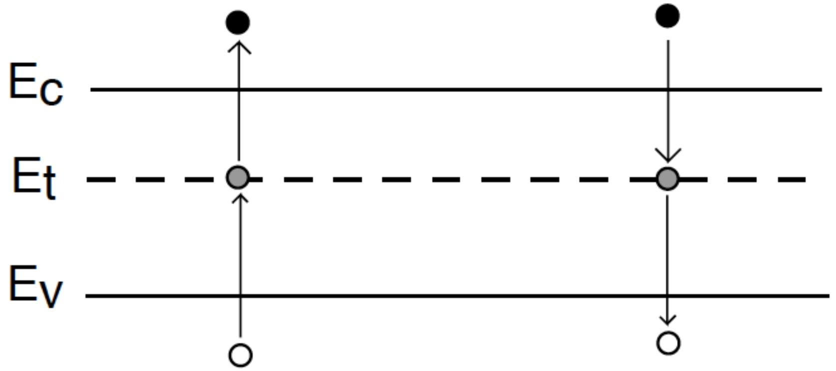
$$\boxed{U_{Auger} = (r_{eeh} n + r_{ehh} p)(np - n_o p_o)}$$

Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

Trap-assisted generation and recombination, relying on electronic states in middle of gap ("deep levels" or "traps") that arise from:

- crystalline defects
- impurities

Energy state within the gap:
2 separate events to bring an electron to the conduction band



trap-assisted thermal generation

trap-assisted thermal recombination

- States in the gap are not allowed, but defects and imperfections result in such states.
- Thermal recombinations are enhanced by mid-gap traps.
- Different from dopants (foreign atoms).
- Trap-assisted generation and recombination is:
  - Dependent on the trap density N_t
  - Dominant effect in Si: affects significantly micro-electronic devices
  - Engineerable: we can introduce deep levels to Si to enhance it

Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Trap-assisted Generation and Recombination

Shockley-Read-Hall model: (** Derivation is on moodle)
Consider a trap at $E_t = E_i$ in concentration N_t :

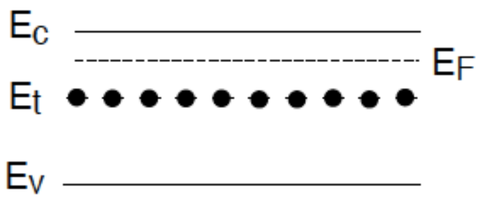
Trap occupation probability: $$f(E_t) = f(E_i) = \frac{1}{1+\exp\frac{E_i - E_F}{kT}} \overset{**}{=} \frac{n_i}{n_i + p_o}$$

Concentration of traps occupied by an electron: $$n_{to} = N_t f(E_i) = N_t \frac{n_i}{n_i + p_o}$$

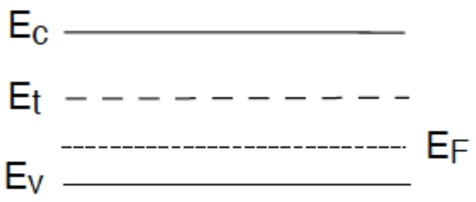
Concentration of empty traps: $$N_t - n_{to} = N_t - N_t \frac{n_i}{n_i + p_o} = N_t \frac{p_o}{n_i + p_o}$$

Trap occupation depends on doping:

- n-type: $p_o << n_i \rightarrow n_{to} \approx N_t$, most traps are full
- p-type: $p_o >> n_i \rightarrow n_{to} << N_t$, most traps are empty



n-type

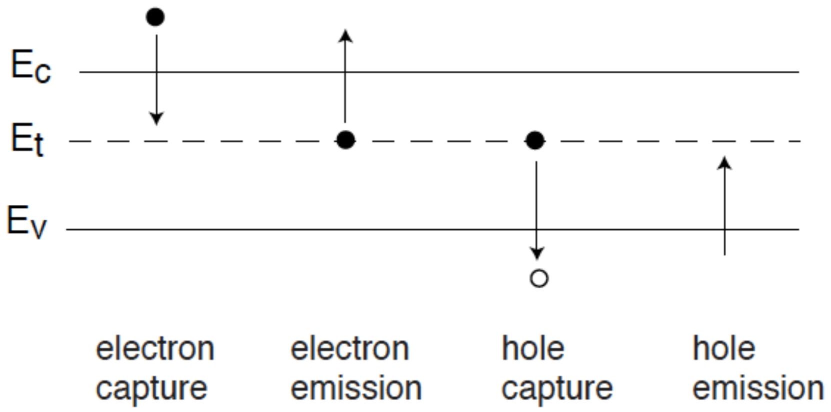


p-type

Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Trap-assisted Generation and Recombination

Four basic processes:



Rates of four sub-processes in TE:

electron capture: $r_{o,ec} = c_e n_o (N_t - n_{to})$

electron emission: $r_{o,ee} = e_e n_{to}$

hole capture: $r_{o,hc} = c_h p_o n_{to}$

hole emission: $r_{o,he} = e_h (N_t - n_{to})$

In thermal equilibrium, detailed balance demands:

$$r_{o,ec} = r_{o,ee}$$

$$r_{o,hc} = r_{o,he}$$

Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Trap-assisted Generation and Recombination

We can also define:

$$\tau_{eo} = \frac{1}{N_t c_e}$$

$$\tau_{ho} = \frac{1}{N_t c_h}$$

τ_{eo} and τ_{ho} are characteristic of the nature of the trap and its concentration. They have units of *s*.

All together, rates of communication of trap with CB and VB:

$$r_{o,ec} = r_{o,ee} \overset{**}{=} \frac{1}{\tau_{eo}} \frac{n_i^2}{n_i + p_o}$$

$$r_{o,hc} = r_{o,he} = \frac{1}{\tau_{ho}} \frac{n_i p_o}{n_i + p_o}$$

where

$$\tau_{eo} = \frac{1}{N_t c_e}$$

$$\tau_{ho} = \frac{1}{N_t c_h}$$

Rates depend on trap nature and density N_t and doping level.

** Proof on moodle

Generation and Recombination in thermal equilibrium

Trap-assisted Generation and Recombination

For n-type semiconductor:

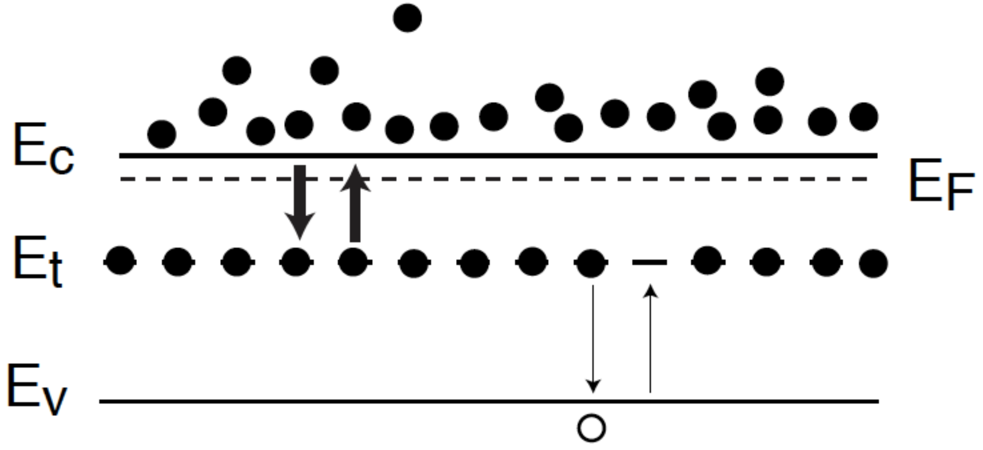
$$r_{o,ec} = r_{o,ee} \simeq \frac{n_i}{\tau_{eo}}$$

$$r_{o,hc} = r_{o,he} = \frac{p_o}{\tau_{ho}}$$

If τ_{eo} not very different from τ_{ho},

$$r_{o,ec} = r_{o,ee} \gg r_{o,hc} = r_{o,he}$$

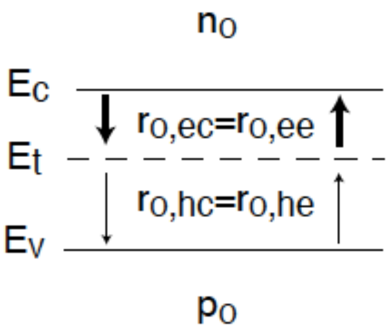
The rate at which trap communicates with CB much higher than VB.



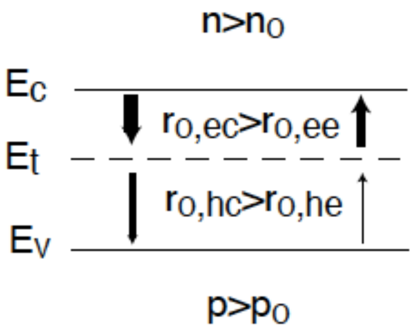
lots of electrons in CB and trap ⇒ $r_{o,ec} = r_{o,ee}$ high
few holes in VB and trap ⇒ $r_{o,hc} = r_{o,he}$ small

Generation and Recombination out of equilibrium

Trap-assisted



thermal equilibrium



with excess carriers

Out of equilibrium, if rate constants are not affected:

$$\begin{aligned} r_{ec} &= c_e n(N_t - n_t) \\ r_{ee} &= e_e n_t = c_e n_i n_t \\ r_{hc} &= c_h p n_t \\ r_{he} &= e_h(N_t - n_t) = c_h n_i (N_t - n_t) \end{aligned}$$

Recombination: capture of one electron + one hole ⇒

$$\begin{aligned} net\ recombination\ rate &= net\ electron\ capture\ rate \\ &= net\ hole\ capture\ rate \end{aligned}$$

$$U_{tr} = r_{ec} - r_{ee} = r_{hc} - r_{he}$$

From this, derive n_t, and finally get U_{tr}:

$$\boxed{U_{tr} = \frac{np - n_o p_o}{\tau_{ho}(n + n_i) + \tau_{eo}(p + n_i)}}$$

Generation and Recombination out of equilibrium

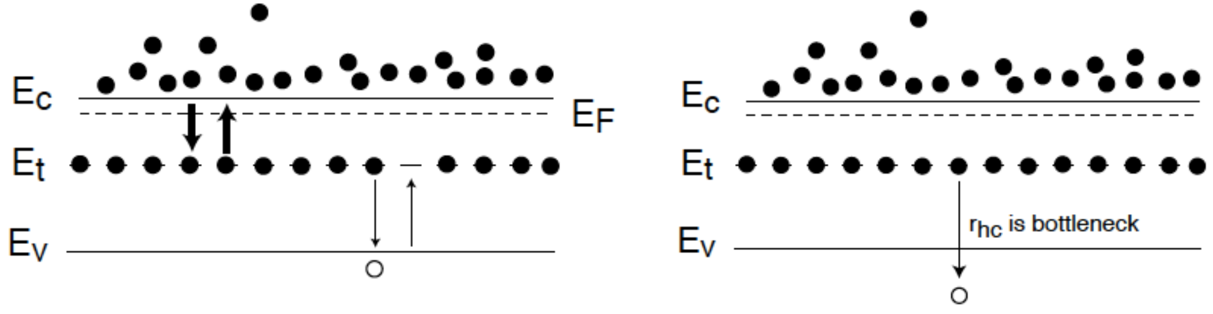
All processes combined

$$\boxed{U = U_{rad} + U_{Auger} + U_{tr}}$$

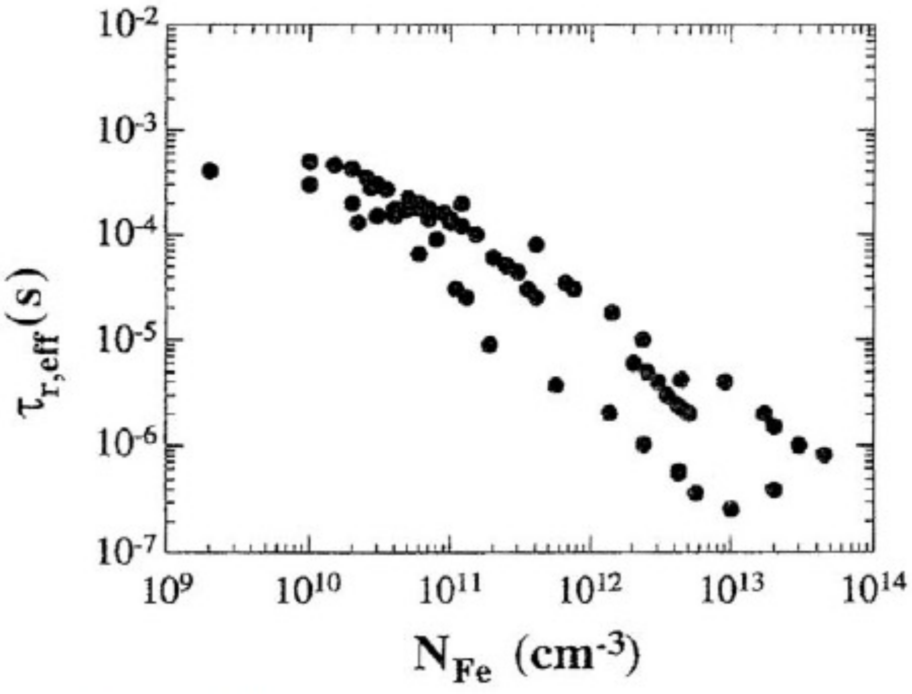
Generation and Recombination out of equilibrium

Trap recombination (n-type material):

Lifetime does not depend on n_o [trap occupation probability rather insensitive to n_o]



Lifetime depends on trap concentration as $\tau \propto N_t^{-1}$



Schroder, D. K. "Carrier Lifetimes in Silicon." *IEEE Transactions on Electron Devices* 44, no. 1 (1997): 160-170.
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Mechanisms of Generation and Recombination

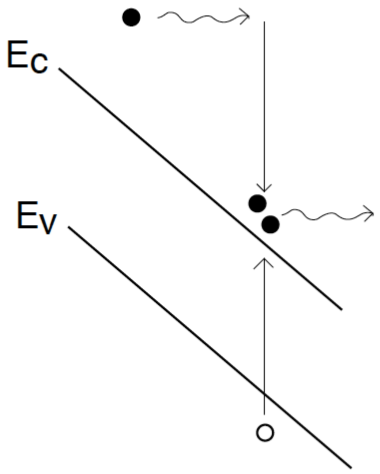
Other generation mechanisms dependent on electric field

Impact ionization:

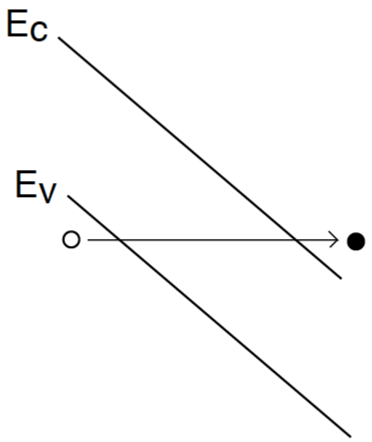
- Auger generation event triggered by electric-field-heated carrier
- Can result in avalanche multiplication: in addition to the primary carriers, the generated electrons produce more impact ionization events

Zener tunneling or field ionization:

Strong electric field rips an electron from the covalent band
Direct tunneling of electron from VB to CB in presence of strong electric field



impact ionization



Zener tunneling

Quiz

1. Which of the following best describes photons compared to phonons?
A) Low energy, large momentum
B) High energy, small momentum
C) High energy, large momentum
D) Low energy, small momentum

2. Why is radiative recombination unlikely in silicon?
A) Silicon has a wide bandgap
B) Silicon has an indirect bandgap, requiring a phonon for momentum conservation
C) Silicon lacks traps in the bandgap
D) Photons in silicon cannot carry enough energy

3. How does Auger recombination rate scale with carrier concentration?
A) Linearly with n or p
B) Quadratically with n or p
C) Cubically with carrier concentration
D) Independent of carrier concentration

4. In n-type Si, why do mid-gap traps communicate more effectively with the conduction band than the valence band?
A) The conduction band is closer in energy to the trap level
B) Most traps are empty in n-type Si
C) There are many more electrons available in the conduction band
D) Traps do not interact with the valence band

5. Which recombination mechanisms dominate in silicon under typical conditions?
A) Radiative and Impact ionization
B) Trap-assisted and Auger
C) Thermal and Tunneling
D) Optical and Zener tunneling

Key conclusions

- Dominant generation/recombination mechanisms in Si: *trap-assisted* and *Auger*.
- In TE, *G* and *R* processes must be balanced *in detail*.
- Auger R rate in TE is proportional to the *square* of the majority carrier concentration and is *linear* on the minority carrier concentration.
- Trap-assisted G/R rates in TE depend on the nature of the trap, its concentration, the doping type and the doping level.
- In n-type semiconductor, mid-gap trap communicates preferentially with conduction band. In p-type semiconductor, mid-gap trap communicates preferentially with valence band.