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Studies of the reactive ion etching of SiGe alloys

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Reactive-ion etching (RIE) of epitaxial, strained Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys, $x<0.20$, in fluorine-chlorine-, and bromine-based low-pressure plasmas has been investigated. The reactive-ion etch rates of the Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys increase with the Ge content of the alloy for most etching gases. This effect is most pronounced for fluorine (CF$_4$ and SF$_6$) plasmas where the etch rate of a Si$_{90}$Ge$_{20}$ alloy is increased by a factor of $\approx 2$ over that of Si. The etch rate enhancement is of reduced importance for chlorine (CF$_2$Cl$_2$) and bromine (HBr) plasmas, where the etch rate increases by less than 50% for a Si$_{90}$Ge$_{20}$ alloy relative to that of elemental Si. Analysis shows that the etch rate increase is not accounted for by the greater rate of gasification of Ge atoms alone but that the presence of Ge atoms in the SiGe alloy increases the Si etch product formation rate. Directional SiGe profiles are observed for CF$_2$Cl$_2$ and HBr plasmas which are identical to those obtained with Si. After etching in CF$_4$ or SF$_6$ plasmas the Ge surface concentration of the SiGe alloy is increased relative to its bulk value and both fluorinated Si and Ge are observed by in situ x-ray photoemission spectroscopy. On the other hand, for CF$_2$Cl$_2$ and HBr plasmas the SiGe surface is Si rich. The effect of band-gap narrowing, strain and plasma-induced surface modifications on the etching of the SiGe alloys is discussed.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study and application of silicon-germanium alloys has recently become important because of progress in thin film growth techniques and the ability to tailor the band gap and electronic properties of the SiGe alloy according to the requirements of the specific desired electronic device.1,2 Because of the lattice mismatch between Si and Ge, epitaxial Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys grown on Si are strained.1 Therefore only thin layers of Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ with good crystallinity can be grown. For many applications, e.g. for heterojunction bipolar transistors, Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ films with a low percentage of Ge$(x<20\%)$ are of primary interest and fairly thick films ($\approx 1 \mu$m) may be grown in that case. The fabrication of heterojunction structures often requires to make contact to a buried SiGe or Si layer, e.g. Si/SiGe/Si heterostructures are used to form Si-based heterojunction bipolar transistors where the base region consists of the SiGe alloy whereas the emitter and collector regions are made of Si.2 Making contact to the SiGe base region requires etching of Si and stopping on the SiGe base. In other applications etching of SiGe and stopping on a Si underlayer is required. So far little is known about the dry etching behavior of SiGe alloys and how it differs from that of silicon. From the point of view of technological applications of dry etching Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ films with a low percentage of Ge$(x<20\%)$ the following issues need to be addressed: Are there any significant differences between dry etching of SiGe with a low percentage of Ge relative to etching Si? Is it possible to etch selectively SiGe over Si or vice versa? Does the etching process introduce surface modifications, e.g. Ge or Si enrichment? How do the surface modifications differ for F-, Cl-, and Br-based etching chemistries? Scientifically the study of halogen-based plasma etching of epitaxial Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ on Si is interesting since it can be viewed as a model system for the interaction of a multi-component substrate with an etching plasma with the attraction of flexible composition without change in crystal structure and the availability of a great deal of data on strain, band gap, etc.

This paper presents a survey of the reactive ion etching (RIE) of epitaxial, strained SiGe thin films on Si (100) with a Ge content of up to $\approx 20\%$. The etch rate, degree of etch directionality and surface chemistry of SiGe alloys were studied as a function of the Ge concentration using in situ ellipsometry, secondary electron microscopy of etched profiles in patterned wafers, and x-ray photoemission spectroscopy (XPS), respectively. The results are compared to data obtained with single-crystal Si and Ge. The following gases were used in this work: CF$_4$ and SF$_6$ for which atomic fluorine is the primary etching species; CF$_2$Cl$_2$ for which etching is due to atomic Cl$^+$ and HBr where etching is due to attack of Br atoms. Atomic fluorine attacks Si and Ge spontaneously and produces mask undercutting. For Cl and Br the etching of undoped Si is ion initiated3 and both CF$_2$Cl$_2$ (Ref. 4) and HBr (Refs. 5 and 6) plasmas produce highly directional etch profiles in Si. For all of the aforementioned halogens it has been shown that Ge etches at a greater rate than Si.7 On the other hand, silicon can be etched with high selectivity over Ge in SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ gas mixtures, e.g. a Si/Ge etch rate ratio of greater than 80 with negligible etching of Ge has been demonstrated.8 We therefore also investigated the etch rate of SiGe alloys in SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ gas mixtures.

II. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Strained, undoped, epitaxial SiGe-alloy films with a Ge content of up to $\approx 20\%$ and a film thickness of up to 800 nm were grown on 5-in Si (100) substrates by ultrahigh vacuum/chemical vapor deposition (UHV/CVD).9,10 Unpatterned 1.5 × 1.5 cm$^2$ chips of these wafers were used for the etch rate and surface analysis measurements. The samples were placed in the center of a rf powered, water-cooled (15 °C) electrode (30 cm diam) made of Cu with an Al cover. This 13.56-MHz-powered diode reactor and the asso-
The etched experimental apparatus have been described before and only a brief summary of the experimental conditions relevant to the present etching studies is provided here. For most of the work the bottom electrode was covered with a 2-mm-thick quartz plate, but for some studies the quartz plate was additionally covered with a sheet of Ardel. The applied rf power was varied between 50 and 200 W. Flow rates of 100 sccm of either CF$_4$, SF$_6$, CF$_2$Cl$_2$, or HBr at a pressure of 25 mTorr were used for part of the experiments. The SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ etching experiments used relative gas flows of 35 sccm/65 sccm/80 sccm and were performed at a pressure of 150 mTorr and an rf power of 50-150 W. For improved thermal contact the samples were glued to the surface of the water-cooled electrode employing high-vacuum grease; temperature measurements using a fluoroptic probe have shown that in this case a wafer temperature of ~50 °C is typical for the 200-25 mTorr conditions used for most of the work. The etch rate of the SiGe films was determined in situ using HeNe laser ellipsometry. These measurements used the recently established relationship between the fraction x of Ge of the Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloy and its complex refractive index (at 632.8 nm). For etch profile analysis both photore sist and oxide masks were examined. Approximately 1.5 μm photore sist was spun either directly onto the SiGe layers or after first depositing ~450 nm of SiO$_2$ using a low-temperature CVD process (~300 °C). After patterning of the photore sist using standard lithographic techniques, the photore sist pattern was either used directly as an etch mask or, for the wafers with the oxide interlayer, transferred into the oxide layer using CF$_4$/H$_2$ reactive ion etching followed by O$_2$ plasma removal of the photore sist mask. Surfaces of SiGe-alloy films after 5 min of reactive ion etching, i.e., for steady-state etching conditions, were examined using Al Kα x-ray photoemission after vacuum transfer into a UHV surface analysis system.

III. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

A. Etch rates and profiles of SiGe alloys

In Fig. 1 etch rates of SiGe alloys are shown as a function of Ge concentration in CF$_4$, HBr, and SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ plasmas. Elemental Si and Ge etch rates are shown for comparison. For CF$_4$ and HBr plasmas the etch rate of SiGe increases as the percentage of Ge is raised. This behavior is consistent with the greater etch rate of elemental Ge as compared to that of Si in these plasmas. (The purpose of the dashed lines connecting the SiGe alloy data with the elemental Ge etch rate data is to aid in the comparison of SiGe and Ge etch rates. We do not wish to imply that the actual etch rates would follow the dashed lines.) The SiGe etch rates in CF$_2$Cl$_2$ show a behavior intermediate to that seen for CF$_4$ and HBr plasmas and have been omitted from the figure for the sake of clarity. For SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ RIE a very different behavior of the SiGe etch rate as a function of Ge content is shown. In this case a drop in the etch rate of the SiGe alloys with increasing Ge concentration is seen. This behavior is also consistent with the etch rate ratio (ERR) of elemental Si and Ge since for this gas mixture and the particular RIE conditions employed here no etching of Ge takes place whereas Si continues to etch at a finite rate.

The ratios of the SiGe and Si etch rates for all etching gases investigated is shown as a function of the Ge concentration in Fig. 2. For the fluorine etchants, CF$_4$ and SF$_6$, the SiGe/Si etch rate ratio reaches ~2 for 20% Ge. The SiGe/Si etch rate ratios obtained in CF$_4$ and SF$_6$ plasmas are remarkably similar, although the absolute etch rates differ by about an order of magnitude. For HBr and CF$_2$Cl$_2$ the increase of the SiGe/Si ERR with the Ge content is less pronounced. Only for SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ the SiGe/Si ERR drops below 1 as the Ge content is increased. The etch rate decrease of SiGe alloys in SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ plasmas with increasing Ge concentration is explained by the formation of increasingly more involatile Ge sulfide at the surface of the alloy. For SiGe alloys with a high Ge concentration, e.g., Si$_{50}$Ge$_{50}$, a Si/Ge ERR of ~10 has been demonstrated in SF$_6$/H$_2$/CF$_4$ plasmas. Surface analysis using XPS has shown that the surface of the SiGe alloy becomes very similar to that of elemental Ge reactive ion etching used in the same conditions.

Etch profiles obtained with Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ films with a low
oxide mask was used in this experiment and removed using buffered 
HF prior to taking the secondary electron micrograph.

![Secondary electron micrographs of the etch profiles SiGe (15% Ge)](image)

FIG. 3. Secondary electron micrographs of the etch profiles SiGe (15% Ge) after reactive ion etching using 98 sccm HBr/2 sccm CF$_4$. A 450-nm-thick oxide mask was used in this experiment and removed using buffered HF prior to taking the secondary electron micrograph.

percentage of Ge (<20%) were similar to profiles observed in 
etching of single-crystal Si. For fluorine-rich discharges, e.g. SF$_6$, and oxide-masked SiGe, nearly isotropic 
etch profiles were observed. For fluorine-deficient plasmas, e.g. a CF$_4$ discharge using an Ar etched electrode, and a photoresist mask, more directional profiles were seen. However, the 
width of the trench narrowed in this case as a function of etch 
depth, indicating the importance of the deposition of carbo­
naceous sidewall passivation material. For CF$_3$Cl$_2$ directional 
etch profiles were obtained for both photoresist and oxide masks, but the etch selectivity with respect to the mask 
was low (≈4:1). The most encouraging results were ob­tained with HBr plasmas. In Fig. 3 the profile of a shallow 
trench etched through a 800-nm-thick SiGe film (15% Ge) 
into the Si substrate using 98 sccm HBr/2 sccm CF$_4$ is 
shown. The oxide mask had been removed prior to taking the 
scanning electron microscopy image. We see a highly direc­tional etch profile all the way from the top of the SiGe film 
into the Si substrate. No difference in directionality between 
the SiGe and the Si is noticeable. Some trenching at the 
sidewalls at the bottom of the trench is evident.

If oxide-masked epitaxial SiGe was etched in pure HBr we 
observed frequently the introduction of rough features in the 
etched areas. Introduction of SiGe surface roughness was 
not observed if unpatterned SiGe films were etched using the 
same procedures of initial surface cleaning, in situ etch initia­tion (native oxide removal) and identical conditions for the 
main etch. We were unable to pinpoint the source of oxygen 
which caused the rough features of oxide-patterned sub­
strates, but it may be due to sputtering of the oxide mask 
during the initial period of the etch. It is possible to avoid 
the introduction of surface roughness on the trench bottoms for 
oxide-masked SiGe specimens by adding a small amount of 
CF$_4$ (≈2% of total flow) to HBr and reducing the Si$_{19}$Ge$_{19}$-
to-SiO$_2$ etch selectivity from ≈250 obtained in pure HBr to 
≈19 for 98% HBr/2% CF$_4$ during the initial period of the 
main etch.

B. Surface analysis

Surfaces of reactive-ion-etched SiGe specimens were ex­
mained using XPS after vacuum transfer. X-ray photoelec­
tron spectroscopy survey scans from 0 to 1100 eV binding 
energy of SiGe alloys after CF$_4$ reactive-ion etching showed 
in addition to the expected Si, Ge, and F features weak peaks 
due to C and O. The source of the oxygen is the etching of the 
quartz electrode cover in CF$_4$ plasmas which causes the 
equivalent of ≈4 sccm O$_2$ to be added to the 100 sccm CF$_4$. 
The amount of oxygen measured for the SiGe surfaces in­
eral increases slightly as the percentage of Ge in the SiGe alloy was 
increased. For HBr RIE the etching of the quartz electrode 
cover is negligible and the SiGe samples showed in that case 
only Si-, Ge-, and Br-related photoemission features.

In Fig. 4 high-resolution silicon 2p photoemission spectra are 
shown for a Si$_{19}$Ge$_{15}$ alloy control and a similar sample 
after 5 min of reactive-ion etching in either CF$_4$ or HBr. The 
RIE conditions were 200 W rf power, 25 mTorr pressure, 
and 100 sccm total gas flow. The spectra were acquired at 
grazing emission (15° from the surface) for high surface sen­sitivity. For the control a single, asymmetric peak centered 
at 99.7 eV is observed which is due to the control and an 
additional broad peak near 104 eV is seen. This latter feature 
is caused by silicon bonded to fluorine and a small amount of 
oxygen. As judged from the relative intensities of F 1s and 
O 1s photoemission, the F/O ratio in the reacted surface 
layer is greater than 10. For the Si$_{19}$Ge$_{15}$ sample etched in 
HBr the Si-Si/Ge bonding is reduced relative to the control and an additional broad peak near 104 eV is seen. This latter feature 
was studied previously and been shown to be due to Si bond­
ed to Br.

In Fig. 5 the germanium 2p$_{3/2}$ photoemission spectra cor­
responding to the samples of Fig. 4 are displayed. For the 

![Photoemission spectra of epitaxial SiGe film (15% Ge) control and after reactive ion etching using CF$_4$ and HBr.](image)
control the Ge 2p$_{3/2}$ peak is centered at a binding energy of 1217.9 eV and attributed to Ge–Si/Ge–Ge bonding. For a similar sample after CF$_4$ RIE two distinct peaks are visible, the smaller peak at 1217.9 eV and the dominant peak at 1220.80 eV. The higher binding energy peak is attributed to fluorinated Ge and occurs at the same energy position as that of fluorinated Ge reported previously for single-crystal Ge after reactive-ion etching using CF$_4$. This agreement appears somewhat fortuitous, since (1) the fluorinated Ge peak results from a superposition of GeF, GeF$_2$, GeF$_3$, and GeF$_4$ groups and the peak position will change with the degree of fluorination of the Ge surface and (2) because of the presence of surface oxygen in the present case there should also be some Ge–O bonding. In the previous study a Teflon electrode cover was used and there was no source of surface oxygen.

After RIE using HBr there is no evidence of any brominated Ge although the shift expected in this case of surface oxygen. Therefore, the Ge 2p$_{3/2}$ intensity is greater than the bulk Ge/Si ratio which was obtained by Rutherford backscattering spectrometry. Electron emission angles of 15° (high surface sensitivity) and 90° (4× more bulk sensitive) were used. After CF$_4$ RIE the Ge/Si ratios obtained at 15° are greater than the bulk Ge/Si values showing that the surface is Ge rich in this case. The Ge/Si data obtained at 90° electron emission are close to the bulk values. For HBr the surface Ge/Si ratio is less than the bulk Ge/Si ratio for both photoemission geometries showing that the Si/Ge surface is in this case Si rich. Not shown are results obtained with SiGe alloys after CF$_4$Cl$_3$ RIE where also a Si-rich surface layer was found.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

The reactive ion etch rates of Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys with $x < 0.20$ in CF$_4$, SF$_6$, CF$_2$Cl$_2$, and HBr plasmas all increase with the Ge content of the alloy but they are smaller than etch rates of elemental Ge. The surface analysis data show that for these etching gases the formation of involatile surface films is negligible and transport processes through thick passivation films need not be considered in the understanding of the overall etching reaction. The etch rates are therefore determined by the arrival rate of the F-, Cl-, and Br-etchant species at the surface of the Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloy and the effect of ion bombardment on the surface reactions leading to etching. The etch profiles show that etching of Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ by atomic F does not require ion bombardment (undercut of mask) but that Cl and Br etching are initiated by ion bombardment (no mask undercutting and vertical profiles), i.e. these etch characteristics are essentially silicon like. In the following we will address (1) possible mechanisms for the etch rate increase of SiGe alloys with Ge content and (2) reasons for the difference in Ge surface concentration of SiGe alloys for F-based plasmas on the one hand and Cl- and Br-based plasmas on the other hand.
The simplest picture of the etching of SiGe is independent removal of Si and Ge atoms by the etchant atoms from the SiGe surface at rates measured for the pure elements for the same experimental conditions. The etch rate is then primarily determined by the removal of the species which is more slowly volatilized, i.e. Si in the present case. In Fig. 7 the predictions of this kind of “linear combination of elemental etch rates” SiGe etching model are compared with the experimental data obtained for CF₄, SF₆, and HBr RIE. For model a the measured Ge etch rate in CF₄ was used in the calculation. In model b the removal rate of Ge atoms was assumed to be infinitely fast. Figure 7 shows that no matter what Ge etch rate we choose the simple model of independent etching of Si and Ge significantly underestimates the etch rate of SiGe in fluorine-based plasmas. The agreement is better in the case of Br-based RIE for Ge levels lower than 10%, but for higher Ge concentrations the actual SiGe etch rate is again significantly greater than the predictions of the independent species etching model b (Ge etch rate infinitely fast). We conclude that the presence of several percent Ge in a SiGe alloy significantly increases the rate of Si atom volatilization of the alloy. For Ge concentrations of less than 15% a systematic trend in the magnitude of the enhancement is suggested by Fig. 2 as the etchant is changed from F to Cl to Br: The etch rate enhancement is most pronounced for fluorine-based plasmas, less for chlorine plasmas and least important for bromine plasmas. This trend appears intuitively understandable: Fluorine-based etching of Si has a high spontaneous, chemical etching component and an increase in the Si atom reactivity caused by the addition of Ge atoms will have a large effect on the etch rate. On the other hand, chlorine- and bromine-based etching of Si and SiGe is primarily ion driven and a change in the reactivity of the substrate will have a smaller effect on the etch rate.

There are several mechanisms which can explain why the SiGe alloy etch rate increases with Ge content. Some of these effects are interdependent and, in reality, cannot be separated.

1. Presence of Si–Ge bonds in the SiGe alloy with lower bond strength than Si–Si bonds: Since all stoichiometrically complete germanium-halogen products are less volatile than the corresponding silicon-halogen products the smaller strength of the Ge–Ge bond (2.84 eV is the bond strength of the diatomic molecule[16]) as compared to the Si–Si bond (3.25 eV diatomic[16]) has been suggested as a possible explanation for the greater (as compared to Si) etch rate of elemental Ge in various halogen plasmas. Silicon-germanium bonds (3.12 eV diatomic[16]) are also of lower strength than Si–Si bonds and should make the SiGe alloy more susceptible to halogen attack. However, for low Ge concentrations in the alloy the reactivity of only a fraction of the Si atoms is increased by this mechanism and model calculations show that the possible etch-rate enhancement is smaller than what is experimentally observed in the case of fluorine-based RIE.

2. Surface modifications: A small Ge concentration in the SiGe bulk could affect the etching of the whole substrate if it would be enriched on the SiGe surface. At the surface it could facilitate by an (unknown) catalytic mechanism gasification of Si atoms but remain itself concentrated on the surface. In the growth of SiGe alloys a strong enhancement of growth rates is seen for mixtures of silane or dichlorosilane with germane relative to Si growth rates measured without germane.[10,17] The presence of Ge on the SiGe surface is thought to catalyze silicon growth by enabling increased hydrogen desorption from Ge sites and enabling increased adsorption of film precursors on the growth surface. The Ge enrichment of the SiGe surface after CF₄ and SF₆ RIE seen in this work is consistent with this kind of catalytically enhanced surface mechanism. However, if this mechanism would be solely responsible for the etch-rate enhancement one should observe a maximum enhancement coinciding with the point where the Ge surface concentration has reached the maximum value. Raising the bulk Ge concentration past this value would no longer increase the Ge surface concentration. Instead a linear dependence on the Ge mole fraction is seen experimentally in the case of F-based plasmas. We also find after etching in Cl₂- and Br₂-based plasmas the SiGe alloy surfaces to be Si rich. Since for these halogens the SiGe etch rates are also enhanced over the independent species volatilization model the importance of other effects is indicated.

3. Effect of changes in the electronic properties of the SiGe film with Ge content: The “doping effect”, i.e., the dependence of Si etch rate on the type and concentration of electronically active substitutional impurities in the Si lattice, e.g., group III and group VI dopants, has been studied in considerable detail.[3,18-20] Schwartz and Schaible observe a 300% increase in the etch rate of Si doped with 3% As in a Cl₂ plasma.[18] Doping of the Si substrate increases the chemical etching of Si until for high As concentrations significant mask undercutting in Cl₂ RIE is seen.[18] The magnitude of the doping effect depends on temperature, reactant concentration, and ion bombardment. All studies are qualitatively
consistent with a mechanism where the availability and the transfer of electrons from the semiconductor surface to chemisorbed halogens increases the rate of etchant penetration of the substrate followed by etch product formation.

Changes in the electronic properties of the SiGe substrate could enhance the SiGe etch rate by a mechanism similar to the doping effect of Si by increasing the availability of electrons at the substrate surface. Since Ge in a Si lattice is an isoelectronic impurity, it has even for concentrations in the percent range a much smaller effect on the electronic properties of Si than electronic dopants. The band gap of Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys with $x<0.20$ depends greatly on strain and more weakly on the mole fraction of Ge; for the SiGe films with the highest Ge concentration studied in this work the minimum band gap is $\approx 1$ eV as compared to 1.17 eV for unstrained Si. The band alignment and band offsets of SiGe with the Si substrate depend additionally on the presence of strain in the Si substrate. These changes of the electronic properties of the SiGe alloy with Ge content make electron transfer from the semiconductor to chemisorbed halogens easier and are qualitatively consistent with the observed etch rate increase. The magnitude of the etch rate increase with impurity concentration seen here is smaller than etch rate effects seen for the electronic dopants, e.g. the etch rate increase of a SiGe alloy containing $\approx 20\%$ of Ge over that of Si is only a factor of 2 for F and less than that in the case of Br. The smaller changes in the etch rates are qualitatively consistent with the more subtle changes of the electronic properties of SiGe alloys with increasing Ge content (as compared to changes introduced by the addition of group III and group VI dopants).

(4) Strain effects: Silicon and Ge in the pseudomorphic SiGe alloy on a Si substrate are highly strained which could increase the rate of formation of a volatile, strain-reducing phase. The effect of strain alone on the etch rate is difficult to separate from electronic effects since the electronic properties of SiGe depend strongly on strain.

The changes in stoichiometry of the SiGe alloys after RIE using different halogens are surprising and at this time unexplained. For CF$_3$, RIE the SiGe etch rate increases with Ge content, but the surface is Ge rich. Germanium surface enrichment has already previously been reported for fluorine-based etching of SiGe. This result is more plausible if it is assumed that physical sputtering effects play an important role in the overall etching reaction and determine the stoichiometry of the etching SiGe surface. Germanium, being the heavier atom, is concentrated on the surface. This change in surface composition of SiGe alloys is consistent with data obtained on sputtering of compound targets where surface enrichment of the heavier species is often observed. However, ion-induced sputtering effects are even more important for Cl- and Br-based RIE than for F-based RIE but the SiGe surface is found to be Si-rich after Cl and Br plasma etching. It appears that there is no simple explanation for the changes in stoichiometry of the SiGe alloy surfaces as a result of RIE using different halogens and it is likely that the dominant etch product, its volatility, surface binding energy, the extent of the reaction layer, etc. need to be determined in each case before this question can be answered satisfactorily.

V. CONCLUSIONS

For the reactive ion etching conditions examined in this work the dependence of the etch rates of Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys ($x<0.20$) on Ge content is consistent with the relative etch rate ratios of elemental Si and Ge measured for the same etching gases, i.e. if Ge etches faster than Si in a particular gas the SiGe etch rate goes up with Ge content and vice versa. The dry etch characteristics (rate and profile) are similar to those of single-crystal Si; in particular the etch rate ratio of Si over Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ and Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ over Si($x<0.20$) is limited to $\approx 2$. Reactive ion etching of SiGe using HBr is a promising approach since SiGe alloys can be patterned with a high degree of directionality, high etch selectivity against oxide and photoresist is easily achieved and only relatively minor surface modifications are introduced. The lack of SiGe-to-Si and Si-to-SiGe etch selectivity emphasizes the need for a sensitive and accurate etch endpoint detection method. In-situ ellipsometry is useful for this application since it not only will signal the encounter of a SiGe/Se or Si/SiGe interface but also enables the monitoring of the removal of Si or Si$_{1-x}$Ge$_x$ alloys in real time.

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We cannot rule out the possibility that the SiGe surface under actual plasma etching conditions is Si rich for all halogens and that the differences in surface characteristics are due to different post-plasma processes for F, Cl, and Br once the plasma has been extinguished for the surface analysis. However, a comparison of the fluorine-based etching characteristics of Si$_{0.8}$Ge$_{0.2}$ with those of Ge and Si shows that the etch characteristics of the alloy are Ge like (see Ref. 7). This indicates that the surface of a Si$_{0.8}$Ge$_{0.2}$ alloy under actual etching conditions should be Ge rich.