Comment on "Mechanism of branching in negative ionization fronts"

Citation for published version (APA):

Ebert, U. M., & Derks, G. (2008). Comment on "Mechanism of branching in negative ionization fronts". *Physical Review Letters*, 101(13), [139501]. <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevLett.101.139501>

DOI:

[10.1103/PhysRevLett.101.139501](https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevLett.101.139501)

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2008

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
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Comment on “Mechanism of Branching in Negative Ionization Fronts”

When the fingers of discharge streamers emerge from a planar ionization front due to a Laplacian instability, their initial spacing is determined by the band of unstable transversal Fourier perturbations and generically dominated by the fastest growing modes. The Letter [1] therefore aims to calculate the temporal growth rate $s(k)$ of modes with wave number k , when the electric field far ahead of the ionization front is E_∞ . In earlier work [2–4], $s(k)$ was determined in a pure reaction-drift model for the free electrons, i.e., in the limit of vanishing electron diffusion $D_e = 0$. For negative streamers in pure gases like nitrogen or argon, electron diffusion $D_e > 0$ should be included into the discharge model. This is attempted in [1] in the limit of large field $|E_\infty|$ ahead of the front. A different, extensive analysis with different results can be found in [5]. Below we show that the expansion and calculation in [1] are inconsistent, that the result contradicts a known analytical asymptote, and that it does not fit the cross-checked numerical results presented in [5]. Furthermore, we find in [5] that the most unstable wavelength does not scale as $D_e^{1/3}$ as claimed in [1], but as $D_e^{1/4}$.

In [1], ionization fronts are only considered in the limit $|E_\infty| \gg 1$ ahead of the front which amounts to a saturating impact ionization cross section $\alpha(E) \rightarrow 1$. For $|E_\infty| \gg 1$, planar fronts obey [[1], Eq. (7)] after all fields are rescaled with E_∞ . For any finite E_∞ , a diffusive layer of width $1/\Lambda^* = \sqrt{D_e/[|E_\infty|\alpha(E_\infty)]}$ forms in the leading edge of the front [6]. (We denote the diffusion constant D from [2–6] by D_e to distinguish it from the $D = D_e/|E_\infty|$ in [1].) Following the calculation in [1], Eq. (8) reproduces the diffusive layer for large $|E_\infty|$, but the nonlinear term is incomplete. Then the dispersion relation is calculated by the expansion (11)–(13) about the planar ionization front. Here the expansion of the electron density n_e starts in order δ^2 (where δ is the small expansion parameter), while the expansions of ion density n_p and field E start in order δ . The absence of order δ in the expansion of n_e is unexpected, not explained, and in contradiction with the calculation for $D_e = 0$ in [4].

Jumping to the result of [1], the dispersion relation in Eq. (21) is given as $s = |E_\infty k|/[2(1 + |k|)] - D_e k^2$ in the present notation. The small k limit $s = |E_\infty k|/2 + O(k^2)$ of [[1], Eq. (21)] is consistent neither with the limit $D_e = 0$, where the asymptote $s(k) = |E_\infty k|$ for $|k| \ll \alpha(E_\infty)/2$ was derived in [4], nor with the case $D_e > 0$ where the asymptote $s = c^*|k|$, $c^* = Ed_E v^*|_{E_\infty}$, $v^*(E) = |E| + 2\sqrt{D_e|E|\alpha(E)}$ was proposed in [2] and analytically confirmed in [5].

Furthermore, in [5], dispersion curves $s(k)$ for a range of fields E_∞ and diffusion constants D_e are derived as an eigenvalue problem for s ; they are plotted in Fig. 1. In one case, the curve is confirmed by numerical solutions of

FIG. 1 (color online). Symbols: scaled dispersion relation $s(k)/(c^*\Lambda^*)$ [5] as function of scaled Fourier number k/Λ^* for $E_\infty = -1, -5, -10$ and $D_e = 0.1$ and for $E_\infty = -1$ and $D_e = 0.01$. Line: rescaled prediction [[1], (21)] for $E_\infty = -10$ and $D_e = 0.1$.

an initial value problem; the curves are also consistent with the analytical small k asymptote. The results for positive s are conveniently fitted as $s(k) = c^*|k|(1 - 4|k|/\Lambda^*)/(1 + a|k|)$ with $a \approx 3/\alpha(E_\infty)$ [5]. Figure 1 also shows the prediction from [1] for $E_\infty = -10$ and $D_e = 0.1$; here the reduced diffusion constant $D_e/|E_\infty|$ is as small as 0.01, and the assumptions $|E_\infty| \gg 1$ and $D_e/|E_\infty| \ll 1$ from [1] hold. However, Fig. 1 shows that the data of [5] and the prediction of [1] clearly differ. Therefore also the scaling prediction [[1], Eq. (23)] for the spacing of emergent streamers does not hold; rather our physical arguments and the numerical data in [5] suggest that the fastest growing mode is $k_{\max} = (\sqrt{1 + a\Lambda^*/4} - 1)/a \propto D_e^{-1/4}$ for $\Lambda^* \gg 1$.

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Received 15 June 2007; published 23 September 2008

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevLett.101.139501

PACS numbers: 52.80.Hc, 05.45.-a, 47.54.-r

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