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Spin-Orbit Protection of Induced Superconductivity in Majorana Nanowires

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Spin-orbit interaction (SOI) plays a key role in creating Majorana zero modes in semiconductor nanowires proximity coupled to a superconductor. We track the evolution of the induced superconducting gap in InSb nanowires coupled to a NbTiN superconductor in a large range of magnetic field strengths and orientations. Based on realistic simulations of our devices, we reveal SOI with a strength of 0.15–0.35 eV Å. Our approach identifies the direction of the spin-orbit field, which is strongly affected by the superconductor geometry and electrostatic gates.

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Spin-orbit interaction (SOI) is a relativistic effect that results from electrons moving (orbit) in an electric field ($E$) experiencing a magnetic field ($B_{SO}$) in their moving reference frame that couples to the electron’s magnetic moment (spin). SOI is an essential ingredient of various realizations of topological superconductors, which host Majorana zero-modes, the building blocks of topological quantum computation [1–3]. The prime platform for topological quantum computation is based on a semiconductor nanowire coupled to a superconductor, where the proximity effect opens a superconducting energy gap in the density of states of the nanowire [4,5]. In general, a magnetic field suppresses superconductivity by closing the superconducting gap due to Zeeman and orbital effects [6]. If the nanowire has strong SOI, suppression of the superconducting gap is counteracted and a sufficiently large Zeeman energy drives the system into a topological superconducting phase, with Majorana zero modes localized at the wire ends [4,5]. The main experimental effort in the last few years has focused on detecting these Majorana zero modes as a zero-bias peak in the tunneling conductance [7–13]. However, SOI, the mechanism providing the topological protection, has been challenging to detect directly in Majorana nanowires.

The electric field that gives rise to SOI in our system mainly results from structural inversion asymmetry of the confinement potential (Rashba SOI), which depends on the work function difference at the interface between the nanowire and the superconductor and on voltages applied to nearby electrostatic gates [14–17]. The Rashba SOI in nanowires has been investigated extensively by measuring spin-orbit related quantum effects: level repulsion of quantum dot levels [18,19], and of Andreev states [9,20], weak antilocalization in long diffusive wires [21,22], and a helical liquid signature in short quasiballistic wires [23]. However, the SOI strength relevant to the topological protection is affected by the presence of the superconductor, necessitating direct observation of SOI in Majorana nanowires. Here, we reveal SOI in an InSb nanowire coupled to a NbTiN superconductor through the dependence of the superconducting gap on the magnetic field, both strength and orientation. We find that the geometry of the superconductor on the nanowire strongly modifies the direction of the spin-orbit field, which is further tunable by electrostatic gating, in line with the expected modifications of the electric field due to work function difference and electrostatic screening at the nanowire-superconductor interface.

Figure 1(a) shows the device image. An InSb nanowire (blue) is covered by a NbTi/NbTiN superconducting contact (purple) and a Cr/Au normal metal contact (yellow). The barrier gate underneath the uncovered wire (red) can deplete the nanowire, locally creating a tunnel.
The nanowire is isolated from the barrier gate (red) and the superconductor (blue) by 30 nm thick boron nitride. (a) Differential conductance $dI/dV$ as a function of bias voltage $V$ and barrier gate voltage $V_{\text{bar}}$ at $B = 0$ T. (c) Schematic of the nanowire device and definition of the axes. (d) Band diagram of a Majorana nanowire at an externally applied magnetic field $B$. The arrows indicate the total magnetic field along which the spin eigenstates are always parallel to $B$, which prevents spin-orbit reflection and results in a fast gap closing. This observation matches the predictions of the Majorana nanowire model, as illustrated in Fig. 1(d): when $B \perp B_{SO}$, SOI counteracts the Zeeman-induced gap closing by rotating the spin eigenstate towards $B_{SO}$, which reduces the component of the Zeeman field along the direction of the spin eigenstate. In contrast, when $B \parallel B_{SO}$, the spin eigenstate is always parallel to $B$, which prevents spin-orbit reflection and results in a slow gap closing.

Before we discuss the SOI in more detail, we rule out alternative mechanisms for the anisotropy which can originate in the bulk superconductor, or the InSb nanowire. First, an anisotropic magnetic field-induced closing of the bulk superconducting gap is excluded for the fields we apply, which are far below the critical field of NbTiN ($> 9$ T) [30]. We note that this is different from aluminium films [9,11,40,41], where a small magnetic field ($< 0.3$ T) perpendicular to the film completely suppresses superconductivity, making them unsuitable to reveal SOI from an anisotropic gap closing. Next, we consider Meissner screening currents in NbTiN that can cause deviations in the magnetic field in the nanowire. Our Ginzburg-Landau simulations show that the field corrections due to Meissner screening are negligible [26], since the dimensions of the NbTiN film ($< 1 \mu m$) are comparable to the penetration depth ($\approx 290$ nm). The simulations also show that vortex formation is most favorable along the $z$ axis [26], which implies that the observed anisotropic gap closing is not caused by gap suppression due to vortices near the nanowire [42], since we do not observe the fastest gap closing along $z$ [Fig. 1(f)]. Finally, in the InSb nanowire, the Zeeman $g$ factor can become anisotropic due to quantum confinement [19,43,44]. However, our nanowire geometry leads to confinement in both the $y$ and $z$ directions, implying similar gap closing along $y$ and $z$, inconsistent with our observations [Fig. 1(e)].
Having excluded the above mechanisms, we are now left with three effects: spin splitting of the electron states in magnetic fields with the Landé $g$ factor (Zeeman effect), the orbital effect of the magnetic field representing the Lorentz force acting on traveling electrons, and SOI. To investigate the role of these effects, we use a theoretical three-dimensional Majorana nanowire model defined by the Hamiltonian [4–6]

$$H = \left( \frac{\mathbf{p}^2}{2m} - \mu + V(y,z) \right) \tau_z + \frac{\alpha}{\hbar} \mathbf{\sigma} \cdot (\mathbf{E} \times \mathbf{p}) \tau_z + \frac{1}{2} g \mu_B \mathbf{B} \cdot \mathbf{\sigma} + \Delta_0 \tau_x.$$  

Here, the first term represents the kinetic and potential energy, with $\mu$ the chemical potential measured from the middle of the helical gap and $V(y,z) = (\Delta V_G/R)[y,0,z] \cdot \mathbf{E}$ is the electrostatic potential in the wire, whose magnitude is parametrized by $\Delta V_G$, with $\mathbf{E}$ the direction of the electric field, and $R$ the wire radius. The orbital effect enters the Hamiltonian via the vector potential $\mathbf{A}$ in the canonical momentum: $\mathbf{p} = -i\hbar \nabla + e\mathbf{A}$. Here, $e$ is the electron charge, $\hbar$ is Plank’s constant, and $m^* = 0.015 m_e$ is the effective mass with $m_e$ the electron mass. The second term represents Rashba SOI characterized by a SOI strength $\alpha$, which we set to 0.2 eV Å to find qualitative agreement with the measurements. The third term is the Zeeman term, with an isotropic $g$ factor set to 50 and $\mu_B$ is the Bohr magneton. The last term accounts for the superconducting proximity effect, which we implement in the weak coupling approximation [6]. The Pauli matrices $\tau$ and $\sigma$ act in the particle hole and spin space, respectively. We perform numerical simulations of this Hamiltonian on a 3D lattice in a realistic nanowire geometry using the kwant code [45]. We note that recent theory work shows that the anisotropy is unaffected by additional factors such as the wire length, temperature, and strong coupling to the superconductor [46]. Additional details are provided in the Supplemental Material [26].

We identify which effects explain the observed anisotropic gap closing behavior by including them separately in our simulations. Figure 2(a) shows the magnetic field dependence of the gap without SOI (setting $\alpha = 0$ in the Hamiltonian). In contrast to Fig. 1(e), the gap closes around 0.3 T for all three directions, reflecting the dominant contribution of the Zeeman effect. In Fig. 2(b), we turn on the SOI, and turn off the orbital effect by setting the magnetic vector potential $\mathbf{A} = 0$, which qualitatively reproduces the anisotropic behavior between the $y$ axis and the $x$ and $z$ axes. We have explored other combinations of parameters and find that the experimental results of Fig. 1(e) can only be reproduced by including SOI. We note that adding the orbital effect in Fig. 2(c) shifts the gap closing to a field almost twice as small for $B||y$, which explains why we observe a gap closing for $B||y$ at around 0.25 T, far below 0.45 T, the critical field expected when only the Zeeman effect with $g = 50$ suppresses the gap. By fitting the curvature of the gap closing [47,48] along $x$ [white dashed line in Fig. 1(e)] we estimate a range of the SOI strength $\alpha$ of 0.15–0.35 eV Å from devices $A–D$ (for fitting details and fits to additional devices, see Supplemental Material [26]). This SOI strength is in agreement with the values extracted from level repulsion of Andreev states [20,49] in an additional device $E$ [26]. Since $\alpha$ depends on the electric field in the wire, we expect the observed variation in the SOI strength of devices to be caused by differences in the applied gate voltages and wire diameter. Recently, the level repulsion of Andreev states in InSb nanowires covered with epitaxial aluminium has shown a SOI strength of approximately 0.1 eV Å [20].
Fig. 3(a). Figure 3(a) shows the dependence of the gap on parameters by the angle $\Theta$ for a nanowire with a voltage $V_{\text{SG}}$ and continuously rotate the $B$ field for the same behavior in device $B$. The middle and bottom panels additionally include the orbital effect at two values of the Zeeman effect and SOI. The simulations in Fig. 3(b) show the effect of magnetic wire. (c) Horizontal line cuts of (a) averaged over $V_{\text{SG}} = -3$, 2.25, and 3.75 V (black, orange, blue). Dashed lines indicate the $z$ axis ($\Theta = 0^\circ$). (d) Vertical line cuts of (a) at $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (left) and $\Theta = 90^\circ$ (right).

slightly lower than we find for NbTiN covered nanowires, most likely due to strong coupling to the aluminium superconductor, leading to stronger renormalization of the InSb material parameters [15–17,50–52].

To resolve the direction of the spin-orbit field, we fix the $B$ amplitude and continuously rotate the $B$ direction, parametrized by the angle $\Theta$ in the $yz$ plane [inset of Fig. 3(a)]. Figure 3(a) shows the dependence of the gap on $\Theta$, where we adjust the electric field strength in the nanowire with a voltage $V_{\text{SG}}$ on the super gate (see insets) is varied in the three panels. (b) Simulated $dI/dV$ as a function of $\Theta$ and $V$ at 0.25 T. The top panel includes the Zeeman effect and SOI. The middle and bottom panels additionally include the orbital effect at two values of the potential difference $\Delta V_{\text{G}}$ between the top and middle of the wire. (c) Horizontal line cuts of (a) averaged over $|V| < 0.2$ V at $V_{\text{SG}} = -3, 2.25,$ and $3.75$ V (black, orange, blue). Dashed lines indicate the $z$ axis ($\Theta = 0^\circ$). (d) Vertical line cuts of (a) at $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (left) and $\Theta = 90^\circ$ (right).

Now, we check whether the orbital effect changes $\Theta_{\text{max}}$. The simulations in Fig. 3(b) show the effect of magnetic field rotation on the gap with $B_{\text{SO}} \parallel y$, confirming that $\Theta_{\text{max}}$ is, indeed, always given by the direction perpendicular to $B_{\text{SO}}$, i.e., $\Theta_{\text{max}} = 0^\circ$. Comparing the top panel (without the orbital effect) with the middle panel (with the orbital effect), we conclude that the orbital effect does not affect $\Theta_{\text{max}}$. This conclusion also holds when we vary the potential difference $\Delta V_{\text{G}}$ between the middle and outer of the wire (corresponding to $V_{\text{SG}}$ in the middle panel and bottom panel. We note that, at $\Delta V_{\text{G}} = 2$ meV (bottom panel), the wave function is moved towards the bottom of the nanowire, which increases the strength of the orbital effect by breaking the reflection symmetry about the $z$ axis, as evidenced by the longer angle range over which the gap is closed compared to $\Delta V_{\text{G}} = -4$ meV (middle panel). Experimentally, we also observe this in Fig. 3(a), with line cuts in Fig. 3(c), where the gap is closed over a significantly longer angle range with increasing $V_{\text{SG}}$. We note that we use small values of $\Delta V_{\text{G}}$ in the simulations, because we expect a weak gate response due to

FIG. 3. (a) Measured $dI/dV$ as a function of $V$ upon rotation of $B$ at 0.3 T over angles $\Theta$ and $y$ in device $B$ (see Fig. S5 [26] for the same behavior in device $A$). The voltage $V_{\text{SG}}$ on the super gate (see insets) is varied in the three panels. (b) Simulated $dI/dV$ as a function of $\Theta$ and $V$ at 0.25 T. The top panel includes the Zeeman effect and SOI. The middle and bottom panels additionally include the orbital effect at two values of the potential difference $\Delta V_{\text{G}}$ between the top and middle of the wire. (c) Horizontal line cuts of (a) averaged over $|V| < 0.2$ V at $V_{\text{SG}} = -3, 2.25,$ and $3.75$ V (black, orange, blue). Dashed lines indicate the $z$ axis ($\Theta = 0^\circ$). (d) Vertical line cuts of (a) at $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (left) and $\Theta = 90^\circ$ (right).

FIG. 4. (a) Tilted view electron micrograph of Majorana nanowire device $E$, which is partially covered with NbTiN. In this device, the electric field $E$ (and the associated spin-orbit field $B_{\text{SO}}$) can rotate away from the $z$ axis ($y$ axis), as illustrated in the inset. (b) Measured $dI/dV$ as a function of $V$ and angle $\Theta$ in the $yz$ plane at $|B| = 75$ mT and $V_{\text{SG}} = 5.6$ V, with a horizontal line cut averaged over $|V| < 0.25$ mV in the lower panel. The gap is maximum at $\Theta_{\text{max}} = 32^\circ$ as indicated by the dashed line. (c) Same as (b), but at $V_{\text{SG}} = -1.9$ V and $|B| = 0.15$ T. $\Theta_{\text{max}}$ is gate tuned to $22^\circ$. (d)–(f) Simulated $dI/dV$ at 0.25 T at various $\Delta V_{\text{G}}$ (see inset) with the superconductor rotated to the side by 45° and including the Zeeman effect, SOI, and the orbital effect. The illustrations in the insets indicate the direction of $E$, which is rotated by 45° from $z$ in (d).
effective electrostatic screening by the superconductor, which covers five of the six nanowire facets [53].

Finally, we turn to a second type of device in which the superconducting film only partially covers the nanowire facets [Fig. 4(a)]. This partial superconductor coverage can modify the orientation of $B_{SO}$ by changing the associated electric field direction [14], as sketched in the inset of Fig. 4(a). The electric field in the wire has two main origins. The first one originates from the work function difference between the superconductor and nanowire, which leads to charge redistribution. The resulting electric field is expected to rotate away from the $z$ axis due to the partial superconductor coverage which breaks the spatial symmetry. In Fig. 4(b), we rotate $B$ in the $zy$ plane, perpendicular to the nanowire axis, and find that $\Theta_{\text{max}}$ is, indeed, no longer at zero, but at $32 \pm 2^\circ$. The second contribution to the electric field arises from the applied $V_{SG}$ and the electrostatic screening due to the grounded superconductor. Changing $V_{SG}$ should, therefore, rotate the electric field for partial coverage. Indeed, we find that $\Theta_{\text{max}}$ shifts by $10^\circ$ by adjusting $V_{SG}$ by $7.5$ V [Fig. 4(c)]. Field rotation at intermediate $V_{SG}$ and magnetic field sweeps confirming the change of $\Theta_{\text{max}}$ are shown in the Supplemental Material [26].

In conclusion, the observed gap closing anisotropy for different magnetic field orientations demonstrates SOI in our Majorana nanowires, a necessary condition to create Majorana zero modes. Our experiments reveal that SOI is strongly affected by the work function difference at the nanowire-superconductor interface and the geometry of the superconductor, while electrostatic gating provides tunability of SOI.

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