A brief review in the cavity ring-down technique (CRD) is presented. In this review, there will only be considered the conventional fiber CRD configuration, i.e., there will only be presented researches involving cavities with two couplers with 99:1 ratios, due to the large amount of publications involving this spectroscopy method. The presented survey is divided in different topics related to the measurement of physical parameters, such as strain and temperature, curvature, pressure, refractive index, gas and biochemical sensing.

1. Introduction

The cavity ring-down (CRD) technique consists in a spectroscopy method broadly used in technology. Being mainly employed in the sensor area, this methodology enables an accurate analysis of amplitude behavior over the time. Throughout the past decades, the CRD spectroscopy has been subject of a lot of research, namely in chemical and molecular analysis in real time [1]. The principle involved settles the basis for various configurations, being also applied to resonant optical cavities with high reflective mirrors, as a result of the high evolution of this technique [2,3]. Through association with the previous developed fiber loops, there were implemented new fiber optic-based CRD settings, which, in turn, used a fiber loop operating as the resonant cavity. This configuration quickly obtained a lot of popularity in the scientific community, mainly for presenting an effective alternative to the usual CRD configuration [4]. By virtue of these conceptual studies, the CRD technique has been target of a lot of research in the field can also be easily recognized. The implementations in this field can also be easily recognized. The implementations in this area are quite extensive, which can go from detection of organic dyes [14] to unicellular organisms [15], or even 1-octyne in decane solution [16]. The CRD approach has also been widely used for refractive index of liquids [17–21] and gas sensing [22–25].

Along with the expansion in these areas, the CRD technique has
also been practically reinvented, yielding the investigation of other areas, such as cavity-enhanced spectroscopy [4]. Due to the broad investigation, this technique has been extended being so reported many different functions using a Fiber Loop Ringdown (FLRD) [26]. Opening a micro hole in one of the fiber end faces, a significant reduction in the coupling loss was achieved [27]. In addition to these applications, the CRD technique use is widespread, being implemented in chemical sensors [28], using frequency-shifted interferometry [29], using wavelength-tunable ultrashort pulsed light [30] or even an Optical Time Domain Reflector (OTDR) instead of the usual implemented laser and modulator setup [31]. More recently, a new CRD topology for remote Sensing was demonstrated [32].

The employability of this technique is very wide, offering great flexibility and conferring immense possibilities on its use, such as in fiber loop sensing devices (including fiber Bragg gratings, long period gratings, fiber microchannels and photonic crystal fibers). These elements, when put together with the CRD technique, have allowed high resolution and high sensitive values, yielding huge developments in the optical fiber industry. Thus, pulses of high intensity and highly sensitive photodetectors or optical amplifiers within the cavity are commonly used. The spectroscopy method has shown great potential for high sensitivity detection, which led to a very wide range of applications in research laboratories. For this reason, a revision of the work made implementing these conventional structures is presented, in order to elaborate a complete study on this subject.

2. Theory

A fiber cavity ring-down operation lays down on a simple principle. The measurements obtained by adopting a conventional cavity ring-down technique are related to the injection of pulses into an extremely high-finesse bulk cavity, which can be achieved either through the use of reflective layers (R > 99.9%) or simply by using fiber couplers of high split ratios (e.g. 99:1) [27]. In this review, there will only be considered the conventional fiber CRD configuration, i.e., there will only be studied cavities with two couplers with a 99:1 ratio (see Fig. 1). That way, the revision made is limited to the existent research involving this type of conventional structures. As represented in Fig. 1, the configuration operates as follows: port 1 is coupled in with port 3, by means of the first coupler, being the output port 4 recoupled as an input signal (port 5) with the input port 7, through the second coupler. Port 6 and port 3 are connected, forming the cavity ring-down structure. Port 8 is used as an output arm to interrogate the amplitude of the signal over time. The two couplers operate in distinct ways; one for the source and the other for measuring the intensity of the pulse, thus forming the analog of the mirrors in a traditional CRD. In the case of time resolved ring-down signals, the initially received intensity is very low, becoming even less with each round trip, due to the high split ratio of the couplers. However, the high reflectivity or coupling ratios are necessary to achieve large numbers of round trips (traveling more time inside the cavity).

The most important aspect in CRD technique is the independence of the output signal in relation to the power of the input signal, so that there is only output signal dependence with time. Due to the losses in the couplers and the fiber intrinsic attenuation, the pulse will slowly decay as it travels around the loop. The rate of decay of the output pulse train indicates the cavity loss. If the losses are not too significant, although only 1% of the input signal enters the cavity on the first trip, the pulse will still take several turns around the loop, being measured at a given position. Analyzing the signal through port 8, one then observes a series of pulses equally spaced in time, although with increasingly smaller intensities. This time frame can be directly obtained by the formula $t = nL/c$, where $L$ is the length of the cavity, $n$ the effective refractive index of the fiber and $c$ the light velocity.

Let us consider the case when an intensity sensor, $T_s$, is placed inside the fiber loop, for the purpose of measuring a certain physical quantity. At every turn traveled by the pulse, it suffers attenuation by the same factor, caused by the fiber intrinsic attenuation, the couplers insertion losses $T_c$ and the sensor transmission $T_s$. At the end of the first loop, the relation between the intensity of the pulse after the first turn, $I_1$, and the initial one, $I_0$, is given by [14]:

$$\frac{I_1}{I_0} = T_s T_c e^{-\alpha L}$$

(1)

After $n$ turns, considering $T_n$ the time for $n$ turns, the relation between the intensity of the pulse, $I_n$, and the initial one is:

$$\frac{I_n}{I_0} = \left(\frac{I_1}{I_0}\right)^n = (T_s T_c e^{-\alpha L})^n = T_s^n T_c^n e^{-n\alpha L}$$

(2)

The time constant, $\tau$, strongly depends on the losses in the fiber loop [14]:

$$\tau = \frac{L}{c[nL - \ln(T_s T_c^2)]}$$

(3)

The principle involved in these sensing measurements are based on the dependence of the decay time with the sensor transmission. Since the pulse travels several times through the intensity sensor, high sensitivities can be achieved by using this technique. Fig. 2 shows the conceptual behavior of the amplitude of the pulse over time, expected on a conventional CRD configuration.

3. State-of-the-art for physical parameters measurement

3.1. Strain and temperature sensing

In 2004, Tarsa et al. [5] presented a CRD technique with a biconical tapered fiber incorporated in the fiber loop for strain sensing. It was demonstrated a minimum detectable change in ringdown time of 0.08%, corresponding to a minimum detectable displacement of 4.8 nm, and a sensitivity to strain as small as 79 nε/√Hz over a 5-mm taper length. Later, Ni et al. [6] used a long period grating instead inside the fiber loop to measure strain. By detecting the ringdown time at different strain levels, a high sensitivity of 1.261 ns/µε and a minimum detectable strain level of 9 µε could be achieved. Most recently, our research group [7] developed a CRD configuration for the measurement of strain. An
optical time-domain reflectometer (OTDR) was used to send impulses down into the fiber loop cavity, inside of which a chirped fiber Bragg grating (CFBG) was placed to act as a strain sensing element (see Fig. 3). This technique could provide strain results with both conventional CRD-based configuration and the OTDR.

The CRD configuration provided a linear response to strain applied in the range 0–2000 με, and a sensitivity of 1.34 ns/με was obtained. For the same operation range, the OTDR interrogation allowed obtaining a periodic behavior due to CFBG scanning of the wavelength peaks of the multimode laser source while increasing strain. It was shown that the OTDR interrogation method provided a ringdown time response of about 8 μs which was a great improvement when compared to the 23 μs-ringdown time obtained with the conventional CRD configuration.

The only attempt to measure temperature was in 2005, when Wang et al. [8] placed a fiber Bragg grating (FBG) inside the fiber loop of a CRD-based configuration – temperature sensing up to 593 °C was demonstrated using a proof-of-concept device. The ringdown time at room temperature (24 °C) was 4.4 μs and dropped to 3.5 μs when the FBG amplitude changed with increasing temperature until 68 °C. When the FBG was heated to 593 °C, a ringdown time change of 0.8 μs was also observed.

3.2. Curvature sensing

In 2002, Lerber et al. [9] presented a CRD configuration for curvature sensing as a proof-of-concept. A 1.11 m-long singlemode fiber with high-reflection coatings at both ends was chosen for investigating bending-induced losses. A sensitivity of 108 ppm (4.68 × 10^-4 dB) of transmission change was achieved. Our group presented recently a CRD scheme using an added-signal for curvature sensing [10]. In this case, a long period grating (LPG) was used as sensing device; an OTDR was used to send impulses down into the fiber loop. The added-signal was obtained by the sum of several conventional CRD impulses, thus providing an improvement on the curvature sensitivity when compared to the conventional CRD signal processing (see Fig. 4). A linear response was observed in the curvature range [2.2–3.6] m^-1 and a sensitivity of 15.3 μs/m^-1 was obtained. This result was found to be 20-fold the one obtained for the conventional CRD signal processing. The added-signal increased the optical power but increased as well the ringdown time due to the sum of the several loops that light traveled inside the fiber ring. A ringdown time response of 43.3 μs was attained (vs. 23.7 μs for the conventional CRD signal processing).

3.3. Pressure sensing

In 2004, Wang et al. [11,12] reported an exploratory study on a novel fiber ringdown pressure sensor, showing good performances in terms of stability, repeatability, and dynamic range. The dynamic range for pressure measurement was 6.8 × 10^5–18 × 10^6 Pa as the fiber jacket remained in the sensor head. A few years later, Qiu et al. [13] proposed a CRD configuration based on multimode fiber instead for pressure measurement. The multimode fiber was placed inside the fiber loop to act as pressure sensor, presenting higher sensitivity and larger dynamic range – up to 6.2 × 10^7 Pa – compared to the singlemode counterpart [11,12]. Also good stability and repeatability of the sensor was observed.

3.4. Biochemical sensing

In 2002, Brown et al. [14] made the first attempt to develop a fiber loop ringdown method which resembled to the traditional bulk cavity ringdown absorption spectroscopy technique. A pulsed, visible and near-infrared laser light was coupled into an optical fiber, which was wound into a loop using a fiber splice connector. The concept was demonstrated through the measurement of both transmission efficiency of an optical splice and absorption of light
by a liquid sample inserted into the fiber optical loop. The setup successfully measured the solution of an organic dye that was placed between the fiber ends an absorption spectrum of $7 \times 10^{-15}$ mol of the dye 1,1'-diethyl-4,4'-dicarbocyanine iodide in $7 \times 10^{-12}$ L of dimethylsulfoxide was obtained. In 2004, Tarsa et al. [15] implemented a CRD configuration using two optical couplers and a fiber loop cavity for label-free detection of biological species. A chemically etched tapered fiber place inside the fiber ring was used as sensing element which enabled single-cell sensitivity arising from optical scattering of the evanescent field surrounding the tapered fiber. The observed detection limit, based on the minimum detectable loss measured in the system, shown a detectable total scattering cross section of $10 \mu m^2$ for a particle the same size as the mammalian sample cells. For the detection of a single mammalian cancer cell, the measured change in ringdown time was of $0.23 \mu s$/cell. Later, Pu et al. [16] demonstrated the use of an LPG inside the CRD fiber ring as chemical sensor by means of evanescent wave interaction with the surrounding medium. The LPG was submerged into a solution of 1-octyne in decane and measured the ringdown time of 27.03 $\mu s$, with a minimum detectable concentration of $7.8 \times 10^{-5}$ m$^2$/s at 30 °C. Only ten years later, gas sensing was subject of research. In 2013, Zhao et al. [24] proposed instead an acetylene gas cell inside the fiber loop for the measurement of gas concentration in the range [0–5%], showing ringdown times between 13.7 and 12.3 $\mu s$, i.e., decreasing with increasing gas concentration. Recently, Shimizu et al. [25] reported a CRD-based system for CO$_2$ detection. The fiber loop contained a free-space propagation section in order to detect CO$_2$. The light in the free-space section was coupled in and out by collimator lenses coupled with the singlemode fiber loop. In the CO$_2$ concentration range of [0–0.5%] ringdown times between 1.96 and 1.27 ms, respectively, could be attained and a resolution of 0.05% was also achieved.

4. Conclusions

This brief review on CRD shows that one of the new lines of research is the use of existing equipment on the market for long range measurement. An example was recently demonstrated, namely, the use of the OTDR for the measurement of physical parameters, allowing the multiplexing of some CRD in series. Another line of investigation is signal processing that makes the CRD a quick acquisition system and allows analysis in real time. The use of the add-signal as a new solution presents greater sensitivity when the sensor is subjected to external parameters. Finally it was presented the CRD in various applications from the measurement of deformation to gas monitoring. It is clearly that its application in the future will in medicine, biomedical and chemical areas of research.

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