Spring 3-1-2000

Frequency Comb Generation using Femtosecond Pulses and Cross-Phase Modulation in Optical Fiber at Arbitrary Center Frequencies

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**Recommended Citation**

Jones, David J.; Diddams, Scott A.; Taubman, Matthew S.; Cundiff, Steven T.; Ma, Long-Sheng; and Hall, John L., "Frequency Comb Generation using Femtosecond Pulses and Cross-Phase Modulation in Optical Fiber at Arbitrary Center Frequencies" (2000). *Physics Faculty Contributions*. Paper 90.  
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A key tool for optical frequency metrology is a frequency comb that is capable of spanning frequency gaps greater than 100 GHz. In the past, frequency gaps of up to \(-5\) THz were bridged with optical frequency comb generators. Recently a second technique that uses the mode structure underneath the extremely broad spectral bandwidth of femtosecond (fs) pulses was used in a frequency chain to measure the cesium spectral bandwidth of femtosecond pulses. We report results from use of this method to place a 90-MHz frequency comb on an iodine-stabilized Nd:YAG laser at 1064 nm and on a frequency-doubled Nd:YVO4 laser at 532 nm. XPM is verified to be the comb-generating process, and the width of the frequency comb is measured and compared with theory. The spacing of the frequency comb is compared with the femtosecond source, and a frequency measurement with this comb is demonstrated.

A technique is presented for generating optical frequency combs centered at arbitrary wavelengths by use of cross-phase modulation (XPM) between a femtosecond pulse train and a cw laser beam by copropagating these signals through an optical fiber. We report results from use of this method to place a 90-MHz frequency comb on an iodine-stabilized Nd:YAG laser at 1064 nm and on a frequency-doubled Nd:YVO4 laser at 532 nm. XPM is verified to be the comb-generating process, and the width of the frequency comb is measured and compared with theory. The spacing of the frequency comb is compared with the femtosecond source, and a frequency measurement with this comb is demonstrated.

Fig. 1. Experimental setup: SMF, single-mode fiber; Ti:S, Ti:sapphire.
fiber, as indicated in Fig. 1. Figure 2 schematically displays the optical domain near 1064 nm when the I2-stabilized cw Nd:YAG laser has a set of XPM-induced sidebands spaced by \( \Omega_r \) and the second, probe, Nd:YAG laser is detuned by \( \delta \) from first Nd:YAG laser. From Fig. 2 it is clear that the probe laser creates additional tones in the rf spectrum, offset by \( \delta \), on both sides of the \( \Omega_r \) harmonics. In the observed rf spectrum, shown in Fig. 3, \( \Omega_r = 90 \) MHz and \( \delta = 12 \) MHz. The inset of Fig. 3 shows the direct beat between the Nd:YAG lasers and confirms that they are detuned by 12 MHz from each other. The modes labeled 5th and 6th are the fifth and sixth harmonics of the 90-MHz frequency comb at 1064 nm. The 12-MHz spacing of the additional beats from the 90-MHz harmonics verifies that the optical domain presented in Fig. 2 is correct and that XPM is responsible for creating the frequency comb at 1064 nm. If FWM were responsible for generating the frequency comb, the spacing of the heterodyne beats shown in Fig. 3 would not necessarily be 12 MHz and, furthermore, spacing would also depend on the absolute frequency position of the fs comb. No such dependence of the heterodyne beat is observed, further confirming that the frequency comb is created by XPM. This result is not unexpected because of the required phase-matching conditions of FWM.

We can measure the power of the frequency comb as a function of frequency by detuning the probe laser from the comb center and measuring the amplitude of the heterodyne beat (assuming constant probe laser power); these results are given in Fig. 4. A maximum detuning of 15 GHz is obtained before the probe laser mode hops. Although the comb power decreases by 15 dB at a maximum detuning of 15 GHz, there is still a 20-dB signal-to-noise ratio at this point.

Usually the electro-optic crystal in OFC’s is driven with a sinusoid, causing the frequency sidebands to have a Bessel function dependence. The resultant comb width can be calculated analytically. In the case of XPM-generated frequency combs, the phase-modulation function is a series of narrow pulses with an initial duty cycle of \( 10^{-6} \) (10 fs/10 ns) (Ref. 9) for which we are unaware of an analytical solution for the sideband formation. Instead, we perform a numerical calculation. With the pulse train represented by a series of delta functions, the phase modulation is

\[
\phi_{\text{mod}} = \frac{2 \omega n_2 z}{c} I \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \delta(t - nT),
\]

where \( \omega \) is the cw carrier frequency, \( z \) is the interaction length, \( n_2 \) is the nonlinear index, \( I \) is the peak intensity, and \( T \) is the period of the pulse train. In reality the pulses have finite width and height. We include these characteristics in the model by expanding the pulse train as a Fourier series and then truncating the series at \( N \) terms. For large \( N \), the pulse width relative to its period goes as \( 1/N \). Consequently, truncating the Fourier expansion at \( N = 10^6 \) gives a duty cycle of \( 10^{-6} \), which matches the initial experimental conditions. Each of these individual Fourier components has its own modulation effects that can be calculated individually. Specifically, each harmonic produces a set of sidebands with a Bessel function amplitude dependence and an adjacent sideband frequency spacing that corresponds to the order of the particular harmonic. This calculation is performed by addition of the effect of each successive harmonic one at a time. We then find the final sideband structure.
by taking the product of all the sums of the sideband components for each harmonic being considered.

Using experimental parameters, we find the peak modulation depth to be $2\alpha_{\text{mod}} = 3\,800$, which gives a Fourier amplitude for all the harmonics of $1.9 \times 10^{-3}$. A numerical investigation of the model indicates that this value is crucial in determining the magnitude difference between the carrier and the beginning of the sideband envelope. Interestingly, as harmonics are added to the model this difference soon appears to asymptotically approach a fixed value, as shown in Fig. 4. Experimental results are also included in Fig. 4 and agree extremely well with the numerically determined comb height relative to the carrier.

To obtain a truly realistic model of the fs pulse train requires approximately $10^6$ harmonics, and lack of computing resources prevented us from going beyond 4000 harmonics. However, as shown in Fig. 4, with an increasing number of harmonics in the numerical model the sideband envelope converges to the shape of our experimental measurement. Furthermore, with 4000 harmonics, the model predicts a broadband comb envelope spanning 3500 sidebands, or 630 GHz with the present laser. Ultimately, the comb width will be limited by one of three effects: phase-velocity mismatch between the carrier frequency and the nth sideband of the comb, group-velocity mismatch between the fs pulse and the pulse generated by the comb, and group-velocity dispersion of the individual fs modes. These characteristics were not included in the numerical modeling. For the present fiber, we believe that the effects limits the comb width to roughly 2000 sidebands.

Clearly, realization of a significantly larger comb width will accelerate the interest and application of XPM-generated frequency combs. If one could scale the pulse repetition rate to the fs laser up to 1–5 GHz (Ref. 10) while maintaining the effective modulation index, a modest width of 1000 sideband lines could span nearly 5 THz, a width that approaches the performance of conventional OFC’s.

To be useful in frequency metrology, the XPM-induced comb must have a uniform spacing equal to the pulse repetition frequency of the fs laser. The spectral comb uniformity of a 70-fs pulse train emitted directly from an oscillator has been reported to be constant within 3 parts in $10^{19}$. However, the possible introduction of timing jitter by the optical fiber is an obvious concern. The comb spacing measured at two spectral extremes of a pulse train broadened in optical fiber by self-phase modulation was shown to be constant to at least a level of $1.9 \times 10^{-12}$ and a comparable level of performance for the XPM-generated frequency comb is expected. Using the quadrature mixing technique reported in Ref. 4, we calculate a worst case error of $2.2 \times 10^{-12}$ between the generated comb spacing and the fs pulse frequency. A more typical slope of the phase drift improves this upper bound by a factor of 3. No attempt was made to thermally stabilize the input leads to the balanced mixer, so this is an extremely generous estimate of the upper bound.

To demonstrate a possible application of this frequency comb, we measured the detuning between the probe Nd:YAG laser and the $I_2$-stabilized cw Nd:YAG and compared it with a second measurement by using a fast photodiode. If $\Delta f$ is the detuning between the two lasers, then $f_d = n \Omega_{\text{fs}} \pm \Delta f$, where $n$ is the number of comb modes and $\Delta f$ is the heterodyne beat. The sign ambiguity of $\Delta f$ is due to the fact that it is not known a priori whether the individual frequency comb member closest to the probe laser is at a higher or lower frequency. Measurement of a 6-GHz detuning by both methods revealed a discrepancy within the frequency drift of the unstabilized probe Nd:YAG laser.

The flexibility offered by this comb-generation technique is shown in a second experiment in which a frequency comb was placed on a single-frequency, frequency-doubled Nd:YVO$_4$ laser operating at 523 nm. In a manner nearly identical to the procedure described above (and depicted in Fig. 1), approximately 1 mW of 532-nm light is copropagated with fs pulses through an optical fiber. After the fiber output was spectrally resolved, a 90-MHz frequency comb centered at 532 nm was observed.

In summary, we have demonstrated a new application of ultrafast science to optical frequency metrology. Optical frequency combs created by fs pulses and XPM in optical fiber offer the flexibility of nearly arbitrary center frequencies. The possibility of expanding the comb width toward the terahertz level could bridge frequency gaps that are not currently accessible by conventional OFC’s.

Funding for this study was provided by the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the National Science Foundation. D. J. Jones and S. A. Diddams are grateful for the support of the National Research Council. D. J. Jones’s e-mail address is djones@jila.colorado.edu.

References

9. Because of dispersion in the fiber, the pulse will broaden as it propagates, thus changing the duty cycle.