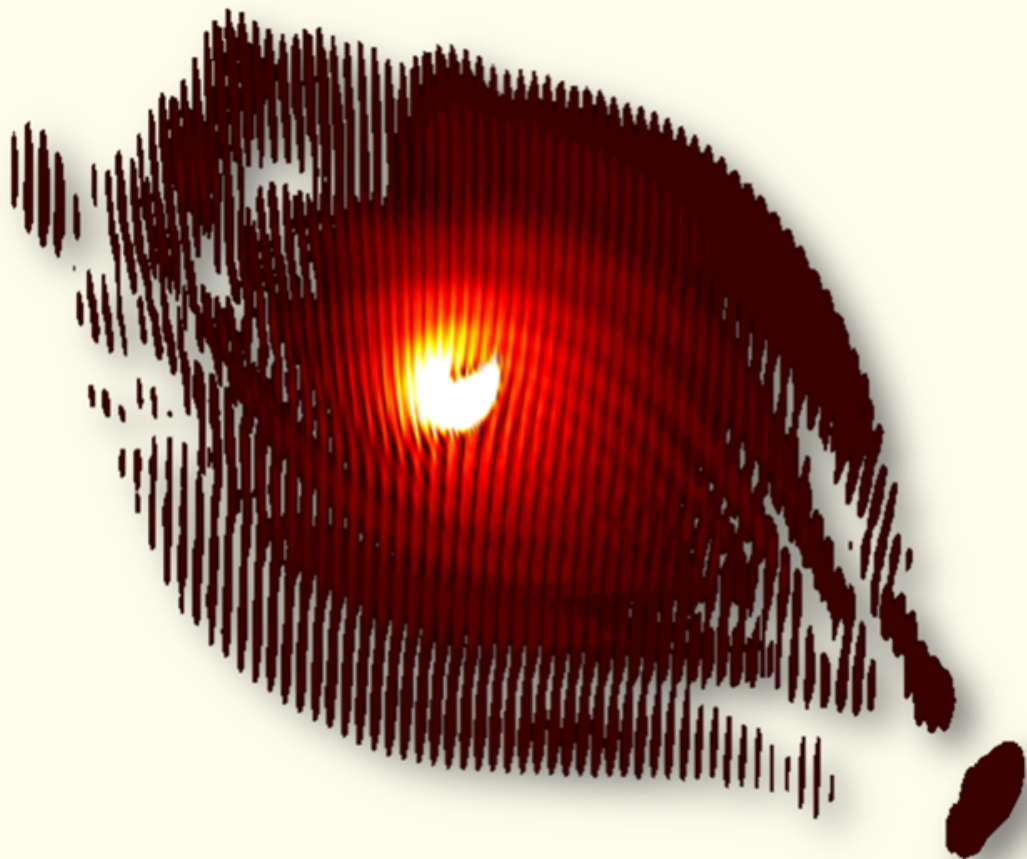


Electron, light, and matter interactions beyond nonrecoil approximations



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Kiel University

Doctoral Thesis

**Electron, light, and matter interactions
beyond nonrecoil approximations**

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Declaration of Authorship

I Fatemeh Chahshouri, declare that this thesis titled, “Electron, light, and matter interactions beyond nonrecoil approximations” fulfills the following conditions: This work has been finished solely by myself, apart from the advice of my supervisor Prof. Dr. Nahid Talebi in terms of content and form, using only the indicated resources. This thesis was not fully or partially submitted, published, or submitted for publication at another place within an examination procedure. Apart from examination procedures published or for publication submitted parts are clearly labeled. The work has been produced in compliance with the rules of good scientific practice of the German Research Foundation. I have never been deprived of an academic degree.

Place and date:

Signed:

*To my Mama,
whose unconditional love, strength, and sacrifices
have laid the foundation for every step I have taken.
This work is dedicated to her memory.*

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Abstract

Light has an important role in both everyday life and scientific research, serving as a powerful tool for lightening and probing, as well as characterizing materials in biology, medicine, chemistry, and physics. The light–matter interaction has a history from Newton’s optical experiments to Planck’s quantization of radiation and Einstein’s photoelectric effect. In recent years, advances in microscopy have enabled unprecedented resolution in light-based imaging, allowing researchers to explore biological and physical samples at the nanoscale and uncover previously hidden features. Alongside this progress, nanophotonics, the study of light at the nanoscale, has emerged as a dynamic field, offering a wide range of applications from high-efficiency solar cells and LEDs to advanced sensors. However, these developments remain fundamentally limited within the light microscopes by the diffraction limit of light. The development of electron microscopes, furthermore, introduced a new perspective to this exploration by employing free electrons as probes to study matter at extremely small scales, surpassing the diffraction limit of light.

Alongside experimental advancements, the theoretical models describing the interaction between light and electrons have traditionally relied on the nonrecoil approximation. This approximation assumes that the electron’s energy remains constant during the interaction. While this approach has been highly effective for fast electrons, this approximation can break when electrons move slowly or when near-fields are strong. Under such conditions, the momentum exchange between light and electrons can no longer be neglected. This thesis addresses this critical gap by exploring electron–photon interactions beyond the nonrecoil approximation, aiming to capture the full information of both spontaneous and stimulated radiation processes in nanomaterials.

This work begins by investigating spontaneous light emissions triggered by electron beams. Using cathodoluminescence (CL) spectroscopy, we examine how slow electrons excite radiative transitions in WSe_2 . A combination of CL measurements and Monte Carlo simulations reveal that electron energy loss within the material influences the resulting far-field radiation spectrum. While in thin WSe_2 flakes, Cherenkov radiation (CR) strongly couples to the A-exciton, in thicker samples, radiation arising from electron deceleration becomes the dominant mechanism. By extending the theoretical framework beyond the non-recoil approximation and incorporating electron deceleration effects, we provided a more complete and accurate description of spontaneous light emission in high-refractive-index materials.

We further investigated optical excitation at GaN/AlGaIn heterojunctions that host two-dimensional electron gases (2DEGs) with quantum-confined states. By combining CL spectroscopy with Monte Carlo and self-consistent Poisson–Schrödinger simulations, we show that the interaction of the electron beam with the heterostructure leads to the generation of secondary electrons, resulting in depth-dependent, incoherent, defect-related luminescence. We demonstrate that by tuning the electron beam energy and current, it is possible to selectively excite distinct luminescence channels originating from the individual layers as well as the interface. These insights are highly relevant for the design of high-performance transistors and light-emitting devices.

The integration of coherent pulsed electron beams with femtosecond laser pulses has significantly advanced electron microscopy, enabling the investigation of quantum phenomena, ultrafast charge oscillations, and nonequilibrium optical excitations. A key development in this context is photon-induced near-field electron microscopy (PINEM), which allows

the study of light–electron interactions with nanometer spatial and femtosecond temporal resolution. Building on this, the thesis explores stimulated interactions by presenting a numerical study of slow-electron wavepacket dynamics in the presence of localized optical near-fields, beyond the nonrecoil approximation.

Using a Maxwell–Schrödinger simulation framework, we investigate how a laser-excited gold nanorod, under moderate laser intensity, generates near-fields that modulate both the amplitude and phase of a slow electron wavepacket. Unlike the nonrecoil approximation, which is limited to describing inelastic energy exchange our approach captures both amplitude modulation and elastic transverse recoil in momentum space. Specifically, we study how polarization, optical phase, and field symmetry govern the interplay between elastic and inelastic interactions of slow electrons with plasmonic near-fields near gold nanorods, beyond the nonrecoil limit.

We begin by examining how the direction of a linearly polarized laser pulse influences energy transfer and transverse momentum diffraction of the electron beam. Following this approach, we implement a sequential, phase-locked excitation scheme and demonstrate that both the initial optical phase and the relative phase offset between localized dipolar zones critically shape the amplitude and phase modulation of the electron wavepacket, as well as its deflection. By precisely controlling the polarization and temporal phase of the laser pulses, we show that the interaction can be engineered to imprint specific spectral and spatial features onto the electron beam. These control mechanisms lay the groundwork for applications in quantum beam shaping, ultrafast spectroscopy, and targeted electron acceleration or deceleration at defined diffraction angles.

Taking this idea one step further, we introduce laser-induced circulating near-fields to transfer angular momentum to electrons. We study electron shaping under the influence of a rotating plasmonic field, considering both plasmonic rotors generated by two orthogonally polarized laser pulses with a controlled phase delay $\pm\frac{\pi}{2}$ and those created using circularly polarized light with defined handedness. We demonstrate angular momentum transfer and a strong directional dependence of the electron modulation on the handedness of the plasmonic field in both real and reciprocal space as well as direction-sensitive deflection. The rotation direction thus emerges as a key parameter for tuning interaction strength and steering transverse recoil. These findings establish plasmonic rotors as a versatile tool for ultrafast electron beam control, with promising applications in next-generation microscopy, spectroscopy, and quantum information processing.

To support experimental validation of the numerical results, we further design two key components for integration into a SEM: (1) a diverging electrostatic lens and (2) a gridless retarding field energy analyzer (RFEA). We design the diverging lens for increasing the angular spread of the electron beam, enabling experiments that rely on interference and diffraction. The RFEA, on the other hand, is employed to measure the energy distribution of the electron beam after interaction.

Altogether, this thesis underscores the critical role of slow electrons in uncovering quantum-coherent electron–photon interactions beyond the traditional nonrecoil approximation. By investigating both spontaneous and stimulated processes from cathodoluminescence in layered semiconductors to near-field-driven modulation using localized plasmons, we demonstrate that the secondary electrons, momentum exchange, and recoil are important factors at low electron energies. These findings lay a foundation for transforming slow-electron platforms into quantum-coherent probes for nanophotonics, ultrafast spectroscopy, and quantum information science.

Kurzfassung

Licht spielt eine entscheidende Rolle sowohl im Alltag als auch in der wissenschaftlichen Forschung. Es dient als leistungsfähiges Werkzeug zur Beleuchtung, Untersuchung und Charakterisierung von Materialien in der Biologie, Medizin, Chemie und Physik. Die Wechselwirkung zwischen Licht und Materie hat eine lange Geschichte, die von Newtons optischen Experimenten über Plancks Quantisierung der Strahlung bis hin zum photoelektrischen Effekt Einsteins reicht. In den letzten Jahren haben Fortschritte in der Mikroskopie eine bisher unerreichte Auflösung ermöglicht, wodurch biologische und physikalische Systeme im Nanobereich untersucht und zuvor verborgene Strukturen sichtbar gemacht werden konnten. Parallel dazu hat sich die Nanophotonik – das Studium von Licht im Nanomaßstab – zu einem dynamischen Forschungsfeld entwickelt, das vielfältige Anwendungen bietet, von hocheffizienten Solarzellen und LEDs bis hin zu fortschrittlichen Sensoren. Dennoch bleiben lichtbasierte Mikroskope durch das Beugungslimit von Licht grundsätzlich eingeschränkt. Auf der Nanoskala offenbaren sich quantenmechanische Phänomene, bei denen Teilchen wie Elektronen und Photonen sowohl Wellen- als auch Teilcheneigenschaften zeigen.

Die Entwicklung der Elektronenmikroskopie hat in jüngerer Zeit eine neue Perspektive eröffnet, indem freie Elektronen genutzt werden, um Materie jenseits der Beugungsgrenze des Lichts zu untersuchen. Parallel zu den experimentellen Fortschritten stützten sich theoretische Modelle der Licht–Elektron-Wechselwirkung traditionell auf die sogenannte „Non-Recoil“-Näherung, bei der angenommen wird, dass die Energie der Elektronen während der Wechselwirkung konstant bleibt. Diese Näherung ist jedoch nicht mehr gültig, wenn Elektronen langsam sind oder das elektromagnetische Nahfeld stark lokalisiert ist. In solchen Fällen kann der Impulsaustausch zwischen Licht und Elektronen nicht mehr vernachlässigt werden. Diese Dissertation schließt diese Lücke, indem sie die Licht–Elektron-Wechselwirkung jenseits der Non-Recoil-Näherung untersucht, mit dem Ziel, sowohl spontane als auch stimulierte Strahlungsprozesse in nanostrukturierten Materialien vollständig zu beschreiben.

Im ersten Teil dieser Arbeit wird die spontane Lichtemission durch Elektronenstrahlen untersucht. Mithilfe der Kathodolumineszenz (CL)-Spektroskopie analysieren wir, wie langsame Elektronen strahlende Übergänge in WSe_2 anregen. Eine Kombination aus CL-Messungen und Monte-Carlo-Simulationen zeigt, dass der Energieverlust der Elektronen im Material das entstehende Strahlungsspektrum im Fernfeld stark beeinflusst. Während in dünnen WSe_2 -Schichten Cherenkov-Strahlung (CR), die innerhalb des Materials gefangen ist, stark mit dem A-Exziton koppelt, dominiert in dickeren Proben die Strahlung aufgrund der Abbremsung der Elektronen. Unsere erweiterten Modelle, welche die Effekte der Elektronenverlangsamung berücksichtigen, liefern eine genauere Beschreibung der spontanen Emission in Materialien mit hohem Brechungsindex.

Darüber hinaus untersuchen wir optische Anregungen an GaN/AlGaN-Heterostrukturen, die zweidimensionale Elektronengase (2DEG) mit quantenmechanisch gebundenen Zuständen enthalten. Durch die Kombination von CL-Spektroskopie mit Monte-Carlo- und Poisson–Schrödinger-Simulationen zeigen wir, dass die Wechselwirkung des Elektronenstrahls mit der Heterostruktur zur Erzeugung sekundärer Elektronen führt, was zu einer tiefenabhängigen, inkohärenten, defektbezogenen Lumineszenz führt. Durch die gezielte Einstellung der Beschleunigungsspannung und Stromstärke des Elektronenstrahls gelingt es uns, verschiedene Lumineszenzkanäle selektiv anzuregen – sowohl aus den Einzelschichten als auch von der Grenzfläche. Diese Erkenntnisse sind besonders relevant für die Entwick-

lung leistungsfähiger Transistoren und lichtemittierender Bauelemente.

Die Integration kohärenter, gepulster Elektronenstrahlen mit Femtosekundenlaserpulsen hat die Elektronenmikroskopie entscheidend erweitert. Dies ermöglicht die Untersuchung quantenmechanischer Phänomene, ultraschneller Ladungsschwingungen und nichtgleichgewichtiger optischer Anregungen. Ein Schlüsselinstrument ist hierbei die photonenerzeugte Nahfeld-Elektronenmikroskopie (PINEM), die Licht-Elektron-Wechselwirkungen mit Nanometer- und Femtosekundenauflösung untersucht. Aufbauend darauf präsentiert diese Arbeit eine numerische Studie zur Dynamik langsamer Elektronenwellenpakete in lokalisierten optischen Nahfeldern – jenseits der Non-Recoil-Näherung.

Basierend auf einem Maxwell-Schrödinger-Simulationsansatz zeigen wir, wie durch Laser erzeugte Nahfelder an einem Goldnanostab sowohl die Amplitude als auch die Phase eines langsamen Elektronenwellenpakets modulieren. Anders als die klassische Näherung erfassen unsere Simulationen sowohl einen inelastischen Energieaustausch als auch einen elastischen transversalen Rückstoß im Impulsraum. Zudem analysieren wir, wie Polarisierung, optische Phase und Feldsymmetrie die Wechselwirkung beeinflussen. Dabei zeigen wir, dass eine gezielte Steuerung der Polarisierung und der Phasenlage der Laserfelder die Wechselwirkung so gestalten kann, dass spezifische spektrale und räumliche Eigenschaften auf den Elektronenstrahl übertragen werden – mit Anwendungen in der Wellenpaketformung, ultraschnellen Spektroskopie und gerichteter Elektronenbeschleunigung oder -verlangsamung.

Im nächsten Schritt führen wir rotierende Nahfelder ein, um ein Drehimpuls-Transfer auf Elektronen zu erzielen. Dabei untersuchen wir Plasmonenrotoren, die durch zwei orthogonal polarisierte Laserpulse mit einer kontrollierten Phasenverzögerung von $\pm \frac{\pi}{2}$ erzeugt werden, sowie solche, die durch zirkular polarisiertes Licht entstehen. Wir demonstrieren den Transfer von Drehimpuls und zeigen eine deutliche Richtungsabhängigkeit der Wechselwirkung – sowohl im Realraum als auch im Impulsraum. Die Rotationsrichtung des Feldes erweist sich als ein zentraler Parameter zur Steuerung der Wechselwirkung und des transversalen Rückstoßes. Diese Ergebnisse positionieren Plasmonenrotoren als vielseitiges Werkzeug zur ultraschnellen Modulation von Elektronenstrahlen.

Zur experimentellen Bestätigung der numerischen Ergebnisse wurden zudem zwei zentrale Komponenten für die Integration in ein Rasterelektronenmikroskop (REM) entwickelt: (1) eine divergierende elektrostatische Linse und (2) ein gitterloser Retarding-Feld-Energieanalysator (RFEA). Die divergierende Linse wurde entworfen, um die Winkelverteilung des Elektronenstrahls zu vergrößern und damit Experimente zu ermöglichen, die auf Interferenz- und Beugungsphänomenen beruhen. Der RFEA hingegen dient zur Messung der Energieverteilung des Elektronenstrahls nach der Wechselwirkung.

Zusammenfassend zeigt diese Arbeit die zentrale Bedeutung langsamer Elektronen für die Untersuchung quantenkohärenter Licht-Elektron-Wechselwirkungen jenseits konventioneller Näherungen. Durch die Kombination experimenteller und numerischer Methoden – von CL in Halbleiterschichten bis zur feldgetriebenen Elektronenmodulation – belegen wir die Relevanz von sekundären Elektronen, Impulsaustausch und Rückstoß bei niedrigen Energien. Die Ergebnisse dieser Dissertation bilden die Grundlage für neuartige Anwendungen im Bereich der Quantenoptik, Nanophotonik und ultraschnellen Spektroskopie mit langsamen Elektronen.

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