Mechanical stability of ultrathin Ge/Si film on SiO₂: The effect of Si/SiO₂ interface

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(Received 10 January 2005; accepted 6 April 2005; published online 3 June 2005)

We perform two-dimensional linear elastic finite element analysis to investigate the mechanical stability of ultrathin Ge/Si film grown on or bonded to SiO₂, using imperfect interface elements between Si and SiO₂ to model Si/SiO₂ interfacial slippage. We demonstrate that the overall composite film is stable when only the tangential slippage is allowed, however, it becomes unstable when normal slippage is allowed: the coherently strained Ge island induces a large local bending of Si layer, and separates the Si layer from the underlying SiO₂ forming a void at the Si/SiO₂ interface. © 2005 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.1926421]

Current semiconductor technology is approaching fundamental and practical limitations to scaling. Different methods have been proposed to enhance device performance other than shrinking the gate oxide thickness and channel length. Two emerging approaches are based on the use of silicon-on-insulator (SOI) substrate and use of strained silicon layer to eliminate substrate current leakage and to improve carrier mobility in the channel. SOI, a composite material used to separate a thin layer of Si from a bulk wafer by an oxide, is becoming prevalent in semiconductor device fabrication. For example, metal-oxide-semiconductor (MOS) transistors (switches used in microprocessors) are built on top of a thin Si layer of SOI. The SOI reduces the capacitance of the switch, achieving faster operation and lowering power consumption. Strained Si technology is based on engineering the strain in silicon, altering its band structure. For example, a tensile-strained Si layer can be grown on a relaxed SiGe buffer layer. Recent results on the application of these concepts to 90-nm silicon MOS field-effect transistors indicated significant performance enhancements in carrier mobility. Furthermore, International Business Machines (IBM) has combined these two methods together to bond strained Si layer with SOI, as an attempt to fabricate higher-clocked switches by lowering their power demands.

Despite the promises made by the strained Si (Ge) layer on SOI, one major technical issue is the mechanical stability of such a strained layer structure, particularly when its thickness is reduced down to the nanometer scale. For instance, it is well known that when Ge is grown on Si, misfit strain induces surface instability and leads to a three-dimensional (3D) island formation. Recently, we have demonstrated that a thin Si layer on SOI (down to ~10 nm) becomes unstable against Ge deposition. The strained Ge 3D islands induce an anomalously large local bending of Si layer underneath the Ge islands. Our theory further showed that the magnitude of the observed local bending approaches the linear elastic limit for a freestanding Si layer, and such bending instability may occur generally for a very thin freestanding Si layer when the Ge island density is low.

Because experimentally no vacuum blister (void) was observed at the Si/SiO₂ interface, it is suggested that the local bending of Si is achieved by a local nonlinear viscous flow of SiO₂ which makes Si layer behave like a freestanding film. In this letter, using finite element analysis (FEA), we examine the mechanical stability of ultrathin Ge/Si/SiO₂ composite film within the linear elastic regime, without viscous flow of SiO₂. We focus our study on the effect of Si/SiO₂ interface by employing imperfect interface elements between Si and SiO₂ to simulate different bonding and relaxation mechanisms at the Si/SiO₂ interface.

The quality of Si/SiO₂ interface affects strongly the mechanical stability of the overall Ge/Si/SiO₂ composite film. It depends on the fabrication techniques and formation processes. The Si/SiO₂ interface formed by thermal oxidation or chemical vapor deposition is expected to be different from which is formed by bonding Si with SiO₂. To account for an imperfect interface, we include normal or tangential displacement discontinuities at the interface to allow interfacial slippages. Our analyses show that the overall composite film is stable without localized bending when only the tangential slippage is allowed; whereas it becomes unstable when the normal slippage is allowed: the strained Ge island induces a large local bending underneath the island and debonds the Si layer from the underlying SiO₂ forming a void.

We perform FEA using the JANFEA software and employ imperfect interface elements to model the Si/SiO₂ interface. JANFEA supports linear elastic imperfect interface elements that are created by defining two separate paths along a line within a material. The element will develop normal and tangential displacement discontinuities related to the stress in the corresponding direction according to the linear law:

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where $\sigma_n$ is the interfacial normal stress and $\tau_t$ is the interfacial tangential stress. $D_n$ and $D_t$ are interface parameters that define the stiffness of the interface for the development of normal or tangential displacement discontinuities at the interface, as denoted by the square brackets $[\mu_n]$ and $[\nu_t]$, respectively. If both $D_n$ and $D_t$ are zero, displacement discontinuities will be zero and the interfacial slippage is eliminated; if both $D_n$ and $D_t$ are infinite, interfacial stresses will be zero and the interfacial slippage is most pronounced. Choosing finite values of $D_n$ and $D_t$ independently allows us to model the different degrees of slippage in the normal and tangential directions.

Figure 1 shows the two-dimensional (2D) FEA model, consisting of a Ge hut island $^5$ (10-nm height) grown on SOI substrate with a very thin Si layer (10 nm). The SiO$_2$ layer is 100 nm thick and ~1000 nm long. The Si/SiO$_2$ interfacial elements are schematically shown as hatched grids. We note that the interface elements describing a line or an element without volume should be considered more like the boundary conditions rather than an element of the material. The interfacial stresses in the interface elements are therefore not used to calculate the average nodal stresses. The boundary condition applied in our model is to fix the displacements along both $x$ and $y$ axes at two endpoints (A and B), as shown in Fig. 1. Also, we use large values of $D_n$ and $D_t$ at both end zones (~50 nm) to prevent interpenetration between Si and SiO$_2$ and sliding along their interface. The generic misfit strain (~4.2%) at Ge/Si interface is introduced by the relative thermal expansion. The FEA uses eight-noded quadrilateral elements providing a 2D plane stress analysis. The material properties, $^{11-13}$ including the Young’s modulus ($E$), Poisson’s ratio ($\nu$), and thermal expansion coefficient ($\alpha$), of the solid Si(100), Ge(100), and SiO$_2$ used in our FEA are listed in Table I.

Initially, the whole composite film is flat. The system is then relaxed by the thermal expansion until the nodal displacements and stresses are converged, reaching the final bent equilibrium structure. We first consider the case of large $D_n$ (“infinite”) and small $D_t$ (“finite”). This corresponds to the physical condition that only tangential slippage is allowed at the interface as the interface will virtually have $[\mu_n]=0$. We fix $D_n$ at ~10$^{20}$ and decrease $D_t$ from 10$^{14}$ to 10$^8$ to obtain three different equilibrium bent structures as shown in Figs. 2(a)–2(c).

The strained Ge island tends to bend the thin Si film and induces an extended bending across the whole composite film. The bending magnitude increases slightly with decreasing $D_t$ from Figs. 2(a)–2(c). In addition to the equilibrium bent structure, Fig. 2 also shows the distributions of the average tangential nodal stress ($\sigma_{t,n}$) in the composite thin film. Because the Ge island is ~4.2% compressively strained, it induces a large tensile stress (large $\sigma_{t,n}$) in the Si layer right underneath the Ge island, and a large compressive stress in the SiO$_2$ below. The tensile stress in the Si layer is maximum under the middle of the island base and decreases towards the island edges. It then becomes compressive in the vicinity of the island edges, similar to the case of the Ge island on a bulk Si substrate.$^{14}$ One interesting point is that a larger tangential interface slippage at smaller $D_t$ further decreases the overall stress in Si and SiO$_2$. Overall, we conclude the composite film to be mechanically stable under the condition with no normal slippage, because no local bending of Si template layer is observed underneath the Ge island.

We next consider the situation when both normal and tangential slippages are allowed at the interface by using small values of both $D_n$ and $D_t$ simultaneously. Figures 2(d)–2(f) show the three equilibrium bent structures by decreasing $D_n$ and $D_t$ from 10$^{14}$ to 10$^8$. Most noticeably, the

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composite film now becomes unstable; with decreasing $D_\text{n}$ and $D_\text{t}$, the Ge island gradually induces a large local bending of the Si layer, which is accompanied by the debonding of the Si template layer from the underneath SiO$_2$. Once the Si layer separates from the underneath SiO$_2$ [Figs. 2(e) and 2(f)], the stress in the Si layer becomes more localized and much larger, while the stress in the underlying SiO$_2$ diminishes. Figure 2(f) shows that the magnitude of the local bending of Si approaches the limit for a freestanding Si film.

Our analyses show that within the linear elastic regime, the local bending of the Si layer induced by the Ge island may only occur and approach the limit for a freestanding Si film if the Si layer separates from the SiO$_2$ forming a big void at the Si/SiO$_2$ interface [Fig. 2(f)]. Therefore, it provides an indirect support to the suggestion that the experimentally observed large local bending$^{6,7}$ is assisted by the local nonlinear viscous flow of SiO$_2$, because no void was observed in the experiment.$^{6,7}$ A direct proof, however, requires simulation of the nonlinear viscoelastic property of SiO$_2$. Currently, we are developing a nonlinear viscoelastic material point method$^8$ for such simulations.

In conclusion, we have performed FEA to investigate the mechanical stability of an ultrathin Ge/ Si film on SiO$_2$ within the linear elastic regime, focusing on the effect of Si/SiO$_2$ interface. We demonstrate the mechanical response of the overall composite film to the interface slippage by employing imperfect interface elements. We illustrate that the overall composite film is stable when only the tangential slippage is allowed. However, it becomes unstable when normal slippage is allowed: the coherent strained Ge island induces a large local bending of Si layer, which is separated from the underlying SiO$_2$ forming a void at the Si/SiO$_2$ interface. Thus, the quality of Si/SiO$_2$ interface is expected to play an important role in controlling the stability of those device structures employing the strained Si/SiO$_2$ film. Because the techniques involving strained Ge/Si on SOI have been proposed to make next-generation semiconductor devices, the concept we elucidate here will become increasingly important, especially as the dimension of the devices continue to shrink towards the nanometer scale.

This research was supported by DOE Grant No. DE-FG03-03ER46027.

8. JANFEA is a finite element/MPM package developed by Professor John A. Nairn. http://www.eng.utah.edu/~nairn/JANFEA/