Breaking the Roton Barrier: An Experimental Study of Motion Faster than the Landau Critical Velocity for Roton Creation in He II†

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We report the first observation of objects moving through He II with equilibrium drift velocities \( \vec{v} \) beyond the Landau critical velocity \( v_c \) for roton creation. With \( T \approx 0.4 \) K, \( P = 25 \) bar, \( P = 2 \) kV cm\(^{-1} \), \( \vec{v} = v_0 \) for negative ions is larger than a theoretical prediction by a factor of \( \sim 10^2 \). The vortex-ring nucleation rate is found to decrease with \( P \) above 300 V cm\(^{-1} \), thus resolving apparent inconsistencies between earlier experiments.

In his celebrated explanation of superfluidity, Landau showed that the kinetic energy of a liquid flowing at velocity \( v \) through a tube (or that of a heavy object moving through the liquid) cannot be dissipated through the creation of an excitation of energy \( \epsilon \) and momentum \( p \) in the liquid unless \( \epsilon \geq p^2 \). For He II the minimum value of \( \epsilon/p \) is nonzero, occurring close to the roton minimum in the elementary excitation spectrum, so that a critical velocity \( v_c = (\epsilon/p)_{\text{min}} \approx 50 \text{ m sec}^{-1} \) exists, below which dissipation ought not to occur in the superfluid. Measured critical velocities are usually orders of magnitude smaller, because of the onset of vortex formation at lower velocities, but Rayfield reported that the drift velocity \( \vec{v} \) of negative ions in He II under pressure \( P > 12 \) bar below 0.6 K appeared to reach and to be limited by \( v_c \) when the applied field was raised to about 70 V cm\(^{-1} \). This has remained the only known situation to which Landau’s original criterion for the breakdown of superfluidity appears to be relevant.

Takken has considered roton creation by negative ions moving at velocities slightly greater than \( v_c \) on the basis of a wave radiation model in which each ion is assumed to generate a conical wave of coherent roton radiation, much like the disturbance produced by an airplane breaking the sound barrier. By analogy with the aerodynamic case, a rapid increase in drag is expected as the velocity increases past \( v_c \). Takken concluded that an upper bound on \( v \) is given by \( v_{\text{ub}} = v_c(1 + 10^{-12} F^2) \), where the electric field \( F \) is in V cm\(^{-1} \). A \( 1/3 \) increase of \( v \) above \( v_c \) would therefore require \( F > 10^5 \) V cm\(^{-1} \), implying that any increase of \( v \) beyond \( v_c \) ought to be almost impossible to observe experimentally.

An attempt by Neep and Meyer to test this remarkable assertion was thwarted by an unexpected increase in the vortex nucleation rate \( \nu \) with falling temperature, such that at 0.3 K only vortex rings, and no bare ions, arrived at their collector. Our recent observation that the field emission current at 0.3 K in He II increases dramatically with \( P \) above 12 bar, and is temperature independent below 0.4 K, seemed to be inconsistent with Neep and Meyer’s result. Approximate values of \( \nu \) deduced from the field-emission measurements apparently indicated the feasibility of our present experiment to test Takken’s...
FIG. 1. (a) Electrode structure (diagrammatic) used for the time-of-flight measurements. Pulses of ions from the field emission source $S$ are gated by potentials applied to grids $G_1, G_2$ into the drift space between grids $G_3, G_4$, where they propagate in a large electric field maintained at a uniform value by guard rings $H_1$, $H_2$, and $H_3$. The resultant pulses of current induced in the collector $C$ are amplified and signal-averaged prior to being recorded. (b) A typical received signal, after averaging. The transients at $x$ and $y$ indicate, respectively, the opening and closing of the $G_1, G_2$ gate, and $z$ marks the first arrival of the pulse at $G_3$.

FIG. 2. Measured drift velocity $\bar{v}$ of negative ions as a function of electric field $F$. The precision of the measurements is indicated by their scatter, and there may, in addition, be a scaling error in $\bar{v}$ of up to $\pm 7\%$. The dashed line shows $v_e$.

whether the positions of the leading or trailing edges were used, they were independent of $T$ for $0.3 \text{ K} < T < 0.5 \text{ K}$, and, contrary to expectations, they were substantially in excess of $v_e$ (dashed line) as computed using accepted values of the Landau parameters.

The systematic error in our values of $\bar{v}$ arises almost entirely from uncertainties in the length $G_3G_4$, which was determined by measuring individual components at room temperature, and then applying corrections for thermal contraction. This procedure results in an uncertainty of about $\pm 0.3 \text{ mm}$ in the total length of brass and nylon components; possible buckling of the grids introduces a further uncertainty which is hard to quantify, but which we believe is less than $\pm 0.4 \text{ mm}$. We conclude that $G_3G_4 = 10.2 \pm 0.7 \text{ mm}$.

At $F = 2 \text{ kV cm}^{-1}$, $(\bar{v} - v_e)/v_e = 0.24 \pm 0.09$, compared to $\sim 10^{-3}$ predicted by Takken. Furthermore, the form of our $\bar{v}(F)$ characteristic is qualitatively different from that predicted, which would curve upwards with increasing $F$. We conclude, therefore, that Takken’s model is not applicable to negative ions moving in large electric fields through He II under pressure near 0.4 K.

We note that, for an ion of mass $m_i$, the instantaneous velocity $v$ required for roton creation is, in fact, not precisely $v_{ro}$ but

$$v' = \left[ (\epsilon'/p) + (p'/2m) \right]_{\min} = (\epsilon'/p') + (p'/2m) .$$  

(1)

Conservation of energy and momentum dictate
that the instantaneous velocity immediately afterwards be

$$v' = (\epsilon' / p') - (p' / 2m)$$

so that, assuming the ion to accelerate at a constant rate between emission events, $$\bar{v} = \epsilon' / p'$$.

Supposing that the hydrodynamic mass scales approximately with the ionic volume, and using Springett and Donnelly’s values\(^\text{10}\) of the ionic radius together with Poitrenaud and Williams’s measured effective masses at the saturated vapor pressure,\(^\text{11}\) we find that, for $$P = 25$$ atm, $$m = 60 \text{m}$$.

Using Donnelly’s Landau parameters,\(^\text{6}\) we calculate from (1) and (2) $$v' = 48.3 \text{ m sec}^{-1}$$, $$\epsilon' / p' = 45.6 \text{ m sec}^{-1}$$, $$v'' = 42.9 \text{ m sec}^{-1}$$; and $$v_e = 45.6 \text{ m sec}^{-1}$$, so that, if all rotons were created at $$v'$$, we would find $$\bar{v} = v_e$$ within our experimental error. This is plainly not the case (Fig. 2). We conclude, therefore, that the ion usually accelerates well beyond $$v'$$ before emitting a roton (or creating a vortex ring). Probably, roton emission and vortex ring creation are competing processes whose relative transition probabilities under any given conditions of $$T$$, $$F$$, and $$P$$ will determine the ionic drift velocity which is observed experimentally.

We can deduce the rate $$\nu$$ for creation of charged rings from the variation with $$F$$ of the height $$i_p$$ of the pulse at the collector (Fig. 3). For given values of $$T$$, $$P$$, $$V_e$$, and $$G_e - G_2$$ potential difference, the pulse magnitude $$i_0$$ at $$G_2$$ will be independent of $$F$$ (except, of course, for very small values of $$F$$ where the effective transparency of $$G_2$$ will depart significantly from its geometrical values).

We may, therefore, reasonably attribute the variation of $$i_p$$ with $$F$$ to the expected vortex nucleation events between $$G_e$$ and $$G_2$$. Charged vortex rings, because of their relatively very small velocities, represent ions which effectively are lost from the pulse. Taking for $$i_0$$ the saturation value of $$i_p$$ in high field we have calculated $$\nu$$ using the relation

$$\nu = \tau^{-1} \ln(i_0 / i_p),$$

where $$\tau$$ is the $$G_e - G_2$$ transit time. Values of $$\nu$$ derived in this way (Fig. 4) are independent of emitter, gate, and Frisch grid potentials, but they vary in a complicated manner\(^\text{13}\) with $$F$$, $$T$$, and $$P$$; for small $$F$$, $$\nu$$ decreases with increasing $$T$$, in agreement with the conclusions of Neep and Meyer.\(^\text{12}\) We have, however, verified our earlier inference\(^\text{9}\) that for large $$F$$, $$\nu$$ decreases\(^\text{13}\) with increasing $$F$$ and is apparently independent of $$T$$ below 0.4 K. This discovery enables the nonappearance of bare ions in Neep and Meyer's experiment at $$F \sim 30$$ V cm\(^{-1}\) to be reconciled with their apparent presence in a field emission diode\(^\text{5}\) for which $$F \sim 3000$$ V cm\(^{-1}\), and with the present data. Because the probability of thermally activated escapes of ions from vortices under
these conditions is quite negligible, the phenomenon probably arises from some modification of the nucleation mechanism itself. This cannot be occurring through the “temperature” of the pulse being above ambient because \( \nu \) is found to be independent of \( i_0 \) although it remains possible, of course, that the nucleation process for an individual ion is perturbed by the bunch of rotons which it has itself created and whose density presumably increases with \( F \). Our results would seem to favor models\(^{14}\) in which the vortex ring is formed initially in a symmetrical position around the ion which, for small \( F \), will subsequently move sideways and become trapped; and to weigh against models\(^{15}\) in which a vortex loop is gradually paid out from the ion, which is therefore always trapped.

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\(^{14}\)Cf. measurements of \( \nu \) for small \( F \) by J. A. Titus and J. S. Rosenstein, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **21**, 146 (1968); and R. Zoll and K. W. Schwarz, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **31**, 1440 (1973); These investigations found \( \nu \) to increase monotonically with \( F \), although the latter authors inferred from their high-pressure data for \( F = 25 \) V cm\(^{-1}\) that \( \nu(F) \) was approaching an asymptotic limit in large fields.


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**Focused-Flow Model of Relativistic Diodes**

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A new model of electron flow in high-voltage diodes and superpinch formation is presented. The relativistic cold-fluid–Maxwell equations are reduced, under certain assumptions, to one equation. The model is based on the solution for the electron flow in large aspect-ratio diodes and the inclusion of cathode and anode plasmas. The anode plasma is assumed to be a field-free region. Results are compared to the parapotential-flow model.

The behavior of relativistic electron flow inside high-voltage (~1 MV) diodes is important for obtaining extremely high current densities\(^{1-3}\) and for applications to controlled thermonuclear fusion experiments.\(^{4}\) The strong pinching observed experimentally\(^{1-3}\) on the anode surface has motivated the theoretical investigation and modeling of the so-called superpinch. The parapotential-flow model\(^{5-7}\) predicts scaling laws of diode impedance but is unable to treat electron flow near the cathode or the anode. The metapotential-flow model\(^1\) contains the effects of orbit crossings but relies sensitively on anode plasma dynamics and/or strong plasma bias currents for superpinch formation.

In the focused-flow model presented in this work we treat the electrons within the framework of the steady-state (\( \theta = 0 \)) relativistic-fluid—