Stretchable Microfluidic Radiofrequency Antennas

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This paper describes a new method for fabricating stretchable radiofrequency antennas. The antennas consist of liquid metal (eutectic gallium indium alloy, EGaIn) enclosed in elastomeric microfluidic channels. In particular, a microfluidic structure made of two types of elastomers (polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) and Ecoflex (type 0030, Reynolds Advanced Materials)) with different stiffness has been developed to improve the stretchability and mechanical stability of the antennas. These antennas can be stretched up to a strain defined as the percentage change in length or \((l - l_0)/l_0\) of 120%. This high stretchability allows the resonance frequencies of the antennas to be mechanically tuned over a wide range of frequencies. The antennas can also be repeatedly stretched, while retaining a high efficiency (> 95%) in radiation.

“Stretchability” in electronics has the potential to open new opportunities, particularly for large-area devices and systems, and in systems that require the device to conform to a non-planar surface, or to bend and stretch while in use. Compared to “flexible” electronics built on nonstretchable polymer or paper substrates, stretchable electronics can cover almost arbitrarily curved surfaces and movable parts. Mechanical compliance may increase the comfort of the user for wearable electronics or implantable medical devices, and simplify the integration for a range of applications. New approaches to stretchable electronics are now being developed. In a recent advance, Rogers et al. described stretchable integrated circuits, and Dickey et al. reported an unbalanced loop antenna and a half-wave dipole antenna that were fabricated by injecting GaIn (Ga 68.5%, In 31.5%) into microfluidic channels in elastic PDMS substrates. These antennas can be stretched up to a strain of 40%. This stretchability, however, is significantly less than the maximum strain of 160% that PDMS can sustain. This limitation arises from the fact that these approaches employed only one type of elastomer in the devices. Since only one type of elastomer was employed, the whole structure experienced a uniform strain when being stretched, and was likely to break at the weak points—inhlets and outlets of the microfluidic channels, and interfaces between the elastic and rigid parts (e.g., external electrical connectors) of the devices, even under a strain much smaller than the maximum strain that the elastomer can sustain (Figure S1B, Supporting Information). For this reason, the all-PDMS devices that have been designed to date have suffered from poor mechanical durability.

To improve the stretchability and mechanical durability of silicon/E GaIn-based antennas under strain, we have developed ‘hybrid’ structures that integrate silicone rubbers of different stiffness (Table 1) in building the microfluidic channels. We used a stiff silicon rubber (PDMS) where mechanical stability is required (e.g., around the rigid electrical connector) and a soft elastomer (Ecoflex, another silicone polymer softer than PDMS) where stretchability is necessary (e.g., around the stretchable antenna branches). In an appropriate design of this type, when the soft elastomer containing the liquid metal was stretched by more than 100%, the relatively stiff polymer around the rigid electrical connector was not significantly strained. This hybrid structure showed good mechanical stability.

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram describing the stretchable antenna. As a proof of concept, we chose to fabricate a half-wave...
Table 1. Mechanical properties of PDMS and Ecoflex used as insulating material in stretchable antenna.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elongation at Break [a] (%)</th>
<th>Shore Hardness [b]</th>
<th>Tear Strength [c] (pli)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PMDS 184</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecoflex-0030</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>0.03-30</td>
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</table>

[a] The strain on a sample when it breaks.
[b] A measure of the hardness of a material, typically used for polymers, elastomers and rubbers. Materials measured in Shore 00 scale are much softer than those measured in Shore A scale.
[c] The tensile force required to tear a pre-slit sample film of unit thickness, measured in pli or pounds per linear inch.

A thick (~3 mm in this study) PDMS slab, although not sufficiently elastic to be the sole material used in the intended applications, was suited for regions of low strain; we used it in regions where we needed a stiff material (for example, around the rigid SMA connector). Unlike other PDMS composites, this material is highly stretchable, and can be elongated to up to 10 times its original length without breaking (Table 1); we used Ecoflex for the elastic insulating channels that held the antenna branches. Ecoflex peels away from a master in a manner similar to PDMS, so soft lithography can be used in its fabrication. It is also cured using a procedure and at a temperature (T ≈ 60 °C) similar to that used to cure PDMS, and can easily be processed and co-processed with PDMS. Ecoflex does not adhere well to fully cured PDMS; we therefore contacted half-cured Ecoflex and half-cured PDMS, and cured the composite structure, to ensure good bonding at the boundary between these two types of silicone rubber. The Supporting Information gives detailed descriptions of procedures used to fabricate antennas.

We compared the characteristics of two types of antennas under strain: “all PDMS” structures and “PDMS/Ecoflex” composite structures (in which insulators surrounding the connector are PDMS, and the other parts are Ecoflex). We measured three different properties of antennas to demonstrate the feasibility of a stretchable antenna. i) Radiation: the reflected EM power, and hence the efficiency of radiation of the antenna under strain. ii) Tunability: the resonance frequency of the antenna under strain. iii) Reliability: the frequency response of reflected EM power after repetitively stretching the antenna up to a strain of 50%.

We used a network analyzer to measure the ratio between the reflected and incident EM power as a function of tensile strain (Figure 2). If the antenna radiates efficiently, most of the incident EM power is radiated into free space, and there is little reflected power. This value of reflected power, measured in $S_{11}$, is $-30 \text{ dB}$, $-20 \text{ dB}$ and $-10 \text{ dB}$ when 99.9 %, 99 % and 90 % of the input power is radiated from antenna, respectively (smaller values of $S_{11}$ indicate higher efficiency of radiation for an antenna). For the “PDMS/Ecoflex” structure, the unstrained antennas exhibited $S_{11}$ value of $-33 \text{ dB}$. As the antenna was stretched, $S_{11}$ values varied from $-30 \text{ dB}$ (at strain of 26 %) to $-23 \text{ dB}$ (at strain of 59 %) to $-16 \text{ dB}$ (at strain of 90 %) to $-19 \text{ dB}$ (at strain of 120 %); this progression demonstrates that the “PDMS/Ecoflex” structure exhibits good radiation efficiency, even when stretched up to a strain of 120 %. When stretched further, silicon rubbers (PDMS and/or Ecoflex) employed in the antennas lost adhesion (although the structure did not break), often causing leaks of EGaIn (Figure S1A). On the other hand, for the “all PDMS” structure, unstrained antennas exhibit $S_{11}$ value of $-45 \text{ dB}$, while antennas stretched by 7 % in length exhibit $S_{11}$ value of $-29 \text{ dB}$. These antennas broke under tensile strain greater than 20 %, and were thus unreliable at even moderate values of strain (Figure S1B).

Figure 3 illustrates the change in the resonance frequency of the antenna under different values of strain. The resonant frequency of a half-wave dipole antenna can be calculated by Equation (1), where $f$ is the resonance frequency (MHz), $l$ is the length of antenna (m), and $\varepsilon_{\text{eff}}$ is the effective dielectric constant of the medium (a combination of the dielectric constants of silicone rubbers ($\varepsilon \approx 2.5$) and air ($\varepsilon = 1$) in this study).

$$f = \frac{c}{2 \pi \sqrt{\varepsilon_{\text{eff}}}} \frac{1}{l}$$
Figure 2. The reflected power (dB) from the antenna as a function of the tensile strain. The filled diamonds show the reflected power of “PDMS/Ecoflex” hybrid structure while the open diamonds show that of “all PDMS” structure at their resonance frequencies. Measurement under each value of strain was repeated five times. The “PDMS/Ecoflex” hybrid structure exhibited good radiation efficiency when stretched up to a strain of 120%, while the “all PDMS” structure failed at a strain greater than 20%.

Figure 3. The resonance frequency (GHz) of the antenna as a function of the tensile strain. The resonance frequency of the antenna decreased from 1.53 GHz to 0.738 GHz as the antenna was stretched from \( l_0 \) to \( l = 2.20 l_0 \). After releasing the strain, the resonant frequency returned from 0.738 GHz to 1.53 GHz: the tuning is thus reversible. Measurement under each value of strain was repeated five times; and the data points are shown as individual diamonds (●) in the plot. The fitted curve was calculated using Equation (1) with \( \varepsilon_{\text{eff}} = 2.1 \).

When the length of the antenna increases, the resonant frequency decreases accordingly. In our experiment, the resonance frequency of the antenna decreased from 1.53 GHz to 0.738 GHz as it was stretched from its original length \( l_0 \) to \( l = 2.20 l_0 \). As shown in Figure 3, the good agreement between our measurement and Equation (1) indicated that the antenna worked as predicted. After releasing the strain, the resonant frequency returned from 0.738 GHz to 1.53 GHz. This reversible tuning demonstrated the robustness of our stretchable antenna.

We investigated the reliability of the antenna by repeatedly stretching it up to a strain of 50%. (Figure 4). Even after being stretched over 100 times, the antenna exhibited a resonance frequency nearly the same (within 1%) as the initial measurement. Thus, the combination of a liquid metal antenna with a highly elastic insulating material resulted in an antenna structure that repeatedly returns to its original shape, even after multiple deformations, without losing its electromagnetic properties. In addition, the antennas exhibited little change (within 1%) in their properties over 4 months of storage under ambient conditions.

In conclusion, we have developed a new method to build stretchable antennas with tunable resonance frequencies, by injecting liquid metal into a microfluidic channel in an elastomeric structural matrix. This microfluidic channel uses the combination of two types of silicone rubber with different stiffness to improve the stretchability of the antennas. The structure of the antenna developed in this study has three advantages over existing stretchable antennas:\[12,13\] i) This antenna is highly stretchable, and thus has a wide tuning range. By stretching the antenna, the resonance frequency can be tuned from 0.738 to 1.53 GHz. ii) This antenna is more durable than the one fabricated in a single type of stiff silicone rubber (PDMS). Antennas made using the hybrid PDMS/Ecoflex structure exhibit over
95 % efficiency in radiation at a tensile strain of 120 %, while those reported in [12] and [13] break under a strain greater than 40 %.

iii) This antenna is more reliable to repeated cyclic strain than those comprising only PDMS. The antenna preserves its electromagnetic properties after being stretched 100 times up to a strain of 50 %. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first reliability test reported for stretchable antennas.

Acknowledgements

Masahiro Kubo and Xiaofeng Li contributed equally to this work. The authors thank Yanyan Liu and Nan Sun at Harvard University for valuable discussions. This research was supported by grants from DARPA award (W911NF-08-C-0060) (to iRobot) and AFOSR award (FA9550-09-1-0369), and by the NEC corporation (for the salary of M. Kubo). This work was performed in part at the Center for Nanoscale Systems (CNS), which is supported by the National Science Foundation under NSF award no. ECS-0335765.

Supporting Information

Supporting Information is available online from Wiley InterScience or from the author.

Received: December 8, 2009
Revised: February 23, 2010
Published online: April 22, 2010