Miniature Sensor Node with Conformal Phased Array

Guy A. E. VANDENBOSCH1, Alexander VASYLCHENKO1,2, Montserrat FERNANDEZ-BOLANOS3, Steven BREBELS2, Walter DE RAEDT2, Adrian Mihai IONESCU3

1 Dept. of Electrical Engineering, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Kasteelpark Arenberg 10, 3001 Leuven, Belgium
2 RF-CDM group, IMEC, Kapeldreef 75, 3001 Leuven, Belgium
3 Nanoelectronic Device Laboratory, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland
guy.vandenbosch@esat.kuleuven.be

Abstract. This paper reports on the design and fabrication of a fully integrated antenna beam steering concept for wireless sensor nodes. The conformal array circumcises four cube faces with a silicon core mounted on each face. Every silicon core represents a 2 by 1 antenna array with an antenna element consisting of a dipole antenna, a balun, and a distributed MEMS phase shifter. All these components are based on a single wafer process and designed to work at 17.2 GHz. Simulations of the entire system and first results of individual devices are reported.

Keywords
Conformal array, sensor node, miniaturization.

1. Introduction

Many vital parameters of airborne systems require a continuous monitoring of signals coming from sensors placed all over an aircraft. Wireless sensor nodes allow building a flexible network of various sensors, communicating with each other and/or with a central control system, while omitting heavy wiring to a cabin computer (Fig. 1). A sensor node utilizing an adaptive steerable antenna array enables electronically controlled network reconfigurability. This can be done by reorganizing the connections through redirection of the antenna beam. This may greatly improve the reliability of the whole sensor network. Indeed a sensor node consists of different functional layers such as a radio system, a processing unit, a sensor, a power storage unit and possibly even an energy scavenging system. We propose a conceptual RF radio subsystem for an ultra small sensor cube with dimensions of 1 cm³, which is based on a combination of system-on-chip (SoC) solutions.

Although it is a standard approach for traditionally sized beam steered arrays [1], using discrete components such as a feeding network, phase shifters, and antennas is inapplicable for building an efficient and yet very small phased array. Moreover, although several technologies are available to fabricate antennas [2], [3], integrating all these components on the same substrate allows miniaturizing the system, avoiding extra losses and high packaging cost.

Recently developed RF-MEMS switches, varactors and phase shifters gained a lot of popularity for their integration in radar systems [4]. By integrating RF-MEMS switches with a diversity antenna on one substrate an electrically controlled switched beam was demonstrated in [5], [6]. In order to achieve a more flexible electronic beam steering, in [7] the authors propose a monolithic integration of 3-bit MEMS (Micro-Electro-Mechanical Systems) distributed transmission lines (DMTL) on one substrate with a 1 by 4 antenna array. Relatively narrow beam steering angles of ± 40 deg. were reported with a main lobe degradation while it is steered away from the antenna broadside direction. A mechanical solution does not have the gain degradation for the steered beam, but it is more complex in fabrication and it may be sensitive to any external vibration [8]. The proposed conformal phased array consists of 8 antenna elements which are integrated together with RF-MEMS switches and phase shifters on four independent Si cores (Fig. 2). This array disintegration in four smaller chips decreases fabrication price while improving yield and, most importantly, enables electronic beam steering fully around a cubical sensor node in XZ plane (Fig. 2).
Detailed information on the realization of the cubic antenna topology can be found in [9].

2. Concept of the Beam Steering

A sketch of a single Si chip containing two sections including a microstrip dipole antenna, a balun with CPW-to-CPS (CoPlanar Stripline) transition, a real time phase shifter and a MEMS-based RF switch is depicted in Fig. 3. The antenna design (see Fig. 4) has been optimized to have a good matching and return loss (40 dB) at the desired frequency (17.2 GHz) using a passivated high resistivity (HR) silicon substrate ($\varepsilon_r = 11.9$) of 300 $\mu$m [10]. The level of the cross-polar component remains below -15 dB in the angular sector of interest (upper hemisphere). The balun has been designed to provide a right angle transition from the coplanar waveguide (CPW) of the phase shifter to the CPS feeding line of the dipole antenna.

Only four antenna elements are working at a time for achieving a full circular beam steering in XZ plane around the sensor node (Fig. 2). The other four antenna elements are disabled by RF-MEMS switches. All ON elements have the same excitation amplitude. This simplifies complexity in the cube i.e. only switching elements and phase shifters are needed and no variable gain amplifiers or tunable attenuators. The phase of the ON-elements is optimized to realize a maximum gain for a certain radiation angle. For the given sensor size of 1cm$^3$ the 3dB beam width is always more than 40 degrees. Therefore to provide a uniform circular beam steering around the cube the beam should be tilted with a step of 22.5 degrees. Radiation patterns of the array, simulated in Ansoft HFSS, are dem-
shown in Fig. 5. The gain of the steered beam remains constant within a level of 8.2-8.5 dBi.

3. Monolithic Integration of the Phase Shifter and Its Performance

The phase shifter is realized using a DMTL digital approach which consists of a CPW periodically loaded by capacitive MEMS switches. The whole system is fabricated using a 10 kΩ cm P-type HR Si substrate.

![Fig. 6. Top view of the DMTL loaded in a CPW.](image)

![Fig. 7. Measured S21 argument in different bias states.](image)

A seven-mask process described in [11] in detail is used. CPWs and the dipole antenna are made of sputtered 3 µm Al. Al also acts as structural material to anchor the suspended MEMS and air bridges of the balun and the phase shifter (Fig. 6). The top movable electrode is composed of a thin sputtered Al (1.5 µm) and thick electroplated nickel (Ni) (5 µm) is used for the anchoring, the non-movable air bridges, and the stiff bars to avoid deformation of the thin membrane.

Initially a standalone phase shifter was characterized and measured. The pull-in voltage of all the switches of the DMTL starts at about 17 V bias voltage.

![Fig. 8. Measured reflection coefficient of the phase shifter in different bias states.](image)

![Fig. 9. Measured pass loss of the phase shifter in different bias states.](image)

![Fig. 10. Measured losses of the phase shifter in different bias states.](image)

Fig. 7 shows the phase delay provided by a DMTL for various bits activation. The measured S11 and S21 are presented in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9 respectively. The total losses in the phase shifter in the Up and Down states are measured to be 3 dB and 5 dB (Fig. 10), which comes to 4.9 dB/mm and 0.82 dB/mm losses respectively.
4. Antenna Theoretical and Experimental Results

A Printed Circuit Board (PCB) was designed for measurements of the single chip with two integrated dipoles. This board delivers both RF signal as well as DC biasing of the phase shifters and the RF switch.

Fig. 11. Ready for measurement integrated 1×2 antenna array on the PCB holder.

Fig. 12. Top view Si chip with RF and DC signals supplied via bonding wires.

Fig. 13. Reflection coefficient of the two integrated dipoles fed in parallel.

Simulated and measured reflection coefficient of the two integrated dipoles fed in parallel is shown in Fig. 13. The measured resonance is shifted 2.6 % lower in frequency from the designed 17.2 GHz during simulations in HFSS. This frequency shift can be attributed to some imperfections during the assembly of the PCB holder and the Si chip. Parasitic inductances of the bonding wires are also lowering the resonance frequency. All this will be taken into account and compensated for in the further designs. Fig. 14 demonstrates the measured radiation pattern in H-plane at the resonance frequency of 16.75 GHz. The two dipoles are fed in phase and therefore have a main beam pointed at the broadside of the Si chip. A good cross polarization isolation of about 30 dB is measured at broadside.

Fig. 14. Measured radiation pattern (H-plane) of the 1×2 antenna array at 16.75 GHz.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we have presented the design of a sensor node conformal phased array. Its beam steering concept was validated by full antenna array simulations with 8 antenna elements. A subarray cell consisting of two RF paths and two antennas was measured in unbiased states. The 1 × 2 array cell shows a good matching with a slight shift of the working frequency (2.6 %). The measured radiation pattern at broadside is quite symmetrical and provides a good polarization isolation. This demonstrator of monolithic implementation of a phased array on a single substrate will be elaborated by increasing the number of 1 × 2 antenna cells in order to achieve full circular beam steering around the sensor node. Since recently, the technology to realize the cubical node has been completed, the next step is to integrate four 1x2 array cells into this cube, realizing a full prototype.

References


Guy A. E. VANDENBOSCH was born in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, on May 4, 1962. He received the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, in 1985 and 1991, respectively. Since 1993, he has been a Lecturer, and since 2005, a Full Professor at the same university. His research interests are in the area of electromagnetic theory, computational electromagnetics, planar antennas and circuits, electromagnetic radiation, electromagnetic compatibility, and bio-electromagnetics. Guy Vandenbosch has been a member of the “Management Committees” of the consecutive European COST actions on antennas since 1993, where he is leading the working group on modeling and software for antennas. Within the ACE Network of Excellence of the EU (2004-2007), he was a member of the Executive Board and coordinated the activity on the creation of a European antenna software platform. Currently he is also the chair person of the IEEE-AP/MTT Benelux section.

Alexander VASYLCHENKO received the M.Sc. degree in Radiophysics and the M.Sc. degree in CS from Kharkiv National University and National University of Radio Electronics (Ukraine) in 2000 and 2002. He received his Ph.D. degree in Electrical Engineering from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium in 2010. From 2005 till 2010, he was a contributor to the Antenna Software Initiative within the ACE Network of Excellence of the EU, where he has been participating in the Antenna Software Benchmark Activity for Challenging Applications. He is currently working at CSEM (Switzerland) on development of antenna systems. His work involves development of miniature antennas and integration in SiP/SoC wireless modules, antennas for BAN and medical applications with a strong focus on propagation phenomena.

Montserrat FERNANDEZ-BOLANOS BADIA received the M.Sc. degree in Telecommunication Engineering from the University of Seville, Spain, in 2005. She received her Ph.D degree in Microsystems and Microelectronics from Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) in 2010. Since August 2010, she works as scientific collaborator in the Nanoelectronic device laboratory (NANOLAB) at EPFL. The focus of her research is in the field of RF MEMS switches, phase shifters, and tunable filters for airborne and space applications. Her present research interests include the open challenges of RF MEMS devices such as reliability, packaging and their 3D integration with RF ICs.

Steven BREBELS received the M.S. degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Leuven, Belgium, and is currently working toward the Ph.D. degree at the Inter-University Microelectronics Center (IMEC), Leuven, Belgium. His research within the RF Component Design and Modeling group, IMEC, is directed to integrated circuits and antennas in thin-film and 3D stacked modules. His research interests include microwave and millimeter-wave modules, antennas for BAN and medical applications with a strong focus on propagation phenomena.

Walter DE RAEDT graduated in Electrical Engineering (1981) at KU Leuven, Belgium. From 1981 until 1984 his research focused on ebeam technology at KU Leuven labs. In 1984 he joined IMEC at its start as a project leader in charge of submicron technologies for advanced HEMT devices until 1997. In 1987 he was visiting scientist at IBM Rüschlikon working on fast III-V circuits. From 1997, he joined the MCM group at IMEC in charge of the design, modeling and characterization activities for packaging. Currently he is head of the RFCDM group at IMEC and is also the chair person of the IEEE-AP/MTT Benelux section.


About Authors ...

Guy A. E. VANDENBOSCH was born in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium, on May 4, 1962. He received the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, in 1985 and 1991, respectively. Since 1993, he has been a Lecturer, and since 2005, a Full Professor at the same university. His research interests are in the area of electromagnetic theory, computational electromagnetics, planar antennas and circuits, electromagnetic radiation, electromagnetic compatibility, and bio-electromagnetics. Guy Vandenbosch has been a member of the “Management Committees” of the consecutive European COST actions on antennas since 1993, where he is leading the working group on modeling and software for antennas. Within the ACE Network of Excellence of the EU (2004-2007), he was a member of the Executive Board and coordinated the activity on the creation of a European antenna software platform. Currently he is also the chair person of the IEEE-AP/MTT Benelux section.

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authored more than 200 papers, several patents and book chapters in the field of microwave/mmwave modeling, design and packaging. His current interests are in the field of MEMS-based solutions and SiP (System in package) integration for wireless systems.

Adrian Mihai IONESCU is an Associate Professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne, Switzerland. He received the B.S./M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from the Polytechnic Institute of Bucharest, Romania and the National Polytechnic Institute of Grenoble, France, in 1989 and 1997, respectively. He has held staff and/or visiting positions at LETI-CEA, Grenoble, France, LPCS-ENSERG, Grenoble, France and Stanford University, USA, during 1998 and 1999. His research interests focus on micro- and nano-electronic devices aimed at Integrated Circuit design, especially process development, modeling and electrical characterization. Dr. Ionescu has published more than 250 articles in international journals and conferences. He received three Best Paper Awards in international conferences and the Annual Award of the Technical Section of the Romanian Academy (of Sciences) in 1994. He is director of the Laboratory of Micro/Nanoelectronic Devices (NANOLAB) and head of the Doctoral School in Microsystems and Microelectronics of EPFL.