NIST CESIUM FOUNTAIN FREQUENCY STANDARD: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Time and Frequency Division
National Institute of Standards and Technology
325 Broadway
Boulder, CO 80303

Introduction

The Time and Frequency Division of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) has recently begun operation of a laser-cooled cesium atomic fountain for evaluation as a possible primary frequency standard. This device is conceptually similar to the Zacharias cesium fountain and is similar in layout to the BNM-LPTF (Observatoire de Paris) cesium fountain, which currently has the smallest stated uncertainty of any of the world's primary frequency standards[1][2]. This paper will give a brief description of the NIST Time and Frequency Division’s cesium fountain and present some preliminary data.

Physics Package Description

Laser System

The laser system for the cesium fountain is shown schematically in Fig. 1. Two laser light sources are used. The extended cavity diode laser (ECDL) is tuned and locked about 160 MHz red of the F=4- F’=5 transition. This light is then amplified approximately 20 dB by the tapered amplifier (TA) giving about 300 mW of 852 nm light at the output of the amplifier. The light is then split and frequency shifted by the 80 MHz double-pass acoustooptic modulators (AOM’s) which brings the light back to near resonance. The six molasses and magneto-optic-trap (MOT) beams are generated as a horizontal beam which is split into two pieces both of which are retro-reflected to generate the required four horizontal beams and as separate up and down laser beams. The frequency of the up, down and horizontal beams are set by their respective AOM’s which are driven by separate r.f. synthesizers locked to a common reference. The light output from the tapered amplifier is also used in the detection process described later in this paper.

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A second laser (distributed Bragg reflector) (DBR) tuned to the F=3→F'=4 transition re-pumps atoms lost on the F=4→F'=5 cycling transition. This laser is used to illuminate the MOT/molasses region as well as the detection region.

**Atom Trapping, Cooling and Tossing**

The atoms are gathered from a cesium oven located in the region labeled MOT/molasses in Fig. 2. The cesium atoms are either trapped in a MOT located at the intersection of the six beams followed by an optical molasses step, or they are gathered as molasses with no initial MOT step. The cold atoms are then accelerated upward by detuning the downward laser beam to the red and the upward laser beam to the blue with the constraint that $v_{up} + v_{down} = 2v_{horizontal}$. The height of the toss is set by the magnitude of the detuning.

The initial vertical velocity is approximately 0.852 m/s (MHz) of detuning. After the atoms have been accelerated in the vertical direction the six beam molasses is detuned to the red of the transition by about 16 GHz (optical line widths) while the amplitude of the beams is simultaneously decreased. This post-cooling step reduces the transverse atom temperature in the launched atom sample. After the launch the laser beams are blocked by mechanical shutters to avoid any light shift of the hyperfine transition frequency. After the atoms are launched and post-cooled they traverse the detection region shown in Fig. 2, and then enter the magnetically shielded region.

**State Selection and Ramsey Interrogation**

A ball of cold cesium atoms enters the magnetically shielded region on the way to the first of two microwave cavities. These TE$_{011}$ cavities, described in a paper elsewhere in these proceedings [3], are tuned to be resonant at 9.192 GHz. The first microwave cavity is intended for state selection. In this first cavity the microwave power is set such that the |F=4, m=0⟩ state undergoes a π transition in this cavity. Light resonant with F=4→F'=5 is then applied to the atom. After removing atoms still in the F=4 state. The atom sample, now |F=3, m=0⟩ next encounters the upper microwave cavity where the Ramsey interrogation begins.

This technique has not yet been verified experimentally.

The magnetically shielded region is surrounded by four layers of molybdenum-Permalloy cylindrical shields. Directly inside the innermost shield is an end corrected solenoid which provides the quantization field for the Ramsey interrogation (the C-field) region. The data presented here were gathered with a C-field strength of about 10^5 T. We have not yet measured the uniformity of the C-field as installed on the fountain.

**Atom Detection and Normalization**

An atom sample falling out of the Ramsey region must next be interrogated to measure the populations in the F=4 and F=3 hyperfine levels. At present we detect the populations in a scheme similar to that used in the LPTF fountain. Atoms falling from the Ramsey zone encounter four distinct laser fields. First is a standing wave with ℓ polarization tuned on the F=4→F'=5 transition. Atoms in F=4 scatter approximately 10^5 photons of which 20% are detected. The atoms next encounter a traveling wave tuned as above; this laser removes F=4 atoms from the sample. As the atoms continue to fall they next encounter a laser beam tuned from F=3→F'=4 which pumps F=3 atoms to the F=4 level. Finally the atoms which were in F=3 (now in F=4) encounter a standing wave which is similar to the first standing wave (the polarizations of the two standing waves may or may not be the same) described above. The clock signal is then the number of detected photons from either the first or second standing wave region divided by the sum of the signals from the two standing wave detection regions. This normalization suppresses the effects of noise in the atom number as well as slow laser noise on the final signal. The detection system is shown schematically in Fig. 3.

**Detection**

**Figure 3 - The sequence of detection for atoms in |F=4⟩ and |F=3⟩ levels.**

**Magnetic Field Mapping**

We have installed a system for mapping the magnetic field in the drift region; it should allow relatively simple mapping of the C field. Briefly the two sets of coils generate a magnetic field normal to the C-field direction and by sequencing the current in these coils a rotating magnetic field can be imposed on the atoms in the drift tube. This polarized low frequency (v=350 Hz with a 10^5 Tesla C-field) magnetic field causes Δm=1 transitions when the
frequency and field strength are properly adjusted. The
transition frequency is a linear function of the C-field
strength at the position of the atom when it is excited by this
rotating field and serves as a measure of the local magnetic
field. This technique allows one to induce either \( \Delta m=\pm 1 \) or
\( \Delta m=-1 \) transitions unambiguously. In fact interesting
superposition states can also be generated with the
simultaneous application of \( \Delta m=+(or-)1 \) and \( \Delta F=(or-)1 \)
radiation. The Millman effect can be completely suppressed
by applying the low frequency pulse symmetrically about
apogee. We have not yet verified the operation of this system
and will report on its efficiency at a later date.

Experimental Results

Atom Number

The stability of an atomic fountain can be written as

\[
\sigma_s(\tau) = \frac{\delta v}{\pi v_0} \frac{1}{2N_{\text{detected}}} \sqrt{\frac{T_{\text{cycle}}}{\tau}}
\]

(1)

where \( \delta v \) is the Ramsey line width, \( v_0 \) is the transition
frequency, \( N_{\text{detected}} \) is the total number of atoms which
contribute to the clock signal and \( T_{\text{cycle}} \) is the time for a
complete measurement cycle [4]. Equation (1) assumes that
both the microwave power and the modulation width have
been optimized. Equation (1) can be rewritten in terms of the
atom temperature and the size of the aperture in the
microwave cavity as

\[
\sigma_s(\tau) = \frac{1}{2\pi v_0} \frac{v_{\text{thermal}}}{r_{\text{aperture}}} \frac{1}{N_{\text{launched}}} \sqrt{\frac{T_{\text{cycle}}}{\tau}}
\]

(2)

where \( v_{\text{thermal}} \) is the thermal velocity of the atoms and \( r_{\text{aperture}} \)
is the radius of the aperture in the microwave cavity.

Equation (2) is valid under the assumption that atoms start
from a point source, the atom ball temperature is high enough
that it expands to a size greater than the cavity aperture and
the cavity aperture is the bottleneck for getting atoms through
the system. As Equation (2) shows large cavity openings are
desirable from the standpoint of stability as is the lowest
possible atom temperature, also the clock stability is, in this
approximation, not a function of the Ramsey time. This
behavior is a result of the fact that atoms are being lost at
longer interrogation times at a rate which compensates for the
gain in interrogation time. This atom loss mechanism can be
seen in the experimental data shown in Fig. (4), the atom
number drops off sharply as a function of atom loss height.

Figure 5 - Detected atom number (arbitrary units) as a function of flight time. These data were collected using a MOT followed by optical molasses.

Figure 5 - The central Ramsey fringe on the \( |4,0> \rightarrow |3,0> \) transition. The data shown are simply the detected signal (arbitrary units) in the \( |3,0> \) state plotted as a function of detuning in Hz away from 9.192 631 770 GHz.
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References


* - Permanent address - Istituto Elettrotecnico Nazionale “G. Ferraris” Str. Delle Cacce 91, 10135 Torino It.

Conclusions

We have presented here the first results from the NIST time and frequency laser-cooled cesium fountain. The major subassemblies of the fountain have been discussed including a novel method for mapping the C-field region. Preliminary experimental results including Ramsey fringes on the cesium clock transition have been presented.