Magnetic versus crystal-field linear dichroism in NiO thin films


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We have detected strong dichroism in the Ni L2,3 x-ray absorption spectra of a monolayer NiO film. The dichroic signal appears to be very similar to the magnetic linear dichroism observed for thicker antiferromagnetic NiO films. Detailed analysis reveals, however, that the dichroism is caused by crystal-field effects in the monolayer film, which is a nontrivial effect because the high spin Ni 3d8 ground state is not split by low-symmetry crystal fields. We present a practical method for identifying the independent magnetic and crystal-field contributions to the linear dichroic signal in spectra of NiO films with arbitrary thicknesses and lattice strains. Our findings are also relevant for 3d2 and 3d3 systems such as LaFeO3, Fe2O3, VO, LaCrO3, Cr2O3, and Mn4+ thin films.

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Magnetic linear dichroism (MLD) in soft-x-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) has recently developed into a powerful tool to study the magnetic properties of antiferromagnetic thin films. The contrast one obtains as a result of differences in the magnitude and orientation of local moments is essential to determine the spin anisotropy and parameters like the Néel temperature ($T_N$), as well as to map out spatially the different magnetic domains that are present in antiferromagnetic films. Such information is valuable for the research and application of magnetic devices using exchange bias.

Much of the modern MLD work has been focused on NiO and LaFeO3 thin films, and the observed dichroism has been attributed entirely to magnetic effects. Other sources that could contribute to linear dichroism, however, such as crystal fields of lower than octahedral symmetry, have been neglected or not considered. Indeed, one would expect that such low-symmetry crystal fields are negligible for bulk-like NiO and LaFeO3 films, and, more fundamentally, that such crystal fields will not split the high-spin Ni 3d8 or Fe 3d5 ground state. We have illustrated this insensitivity in Fig. 1 for the Ni2+ case, where the energy level diagram in an O8h environment is compared to that in a D4h point group symmetry. In contrast, an exchange field will split the Ni2+ ground state into three levels with $M_S = -1,0,1$ with an energy separation given by the exchange coupling $J$, see Fig. 1. The basis for obtaining strong dichroism in the Ni L2,3 (2p → 3d) absorption spectra is that dipole selection rules dictate which of the quite different final states can be reached and with what probability for each of the initial states. The isotropic spectrum of each of these three states will be the same, but each state with a different $|M_S|$ value will have a different polarization dependence. A completely analogous argumentation can be given for the orbitally highly symmetric high spin 3d5 and 3d3 cases, e.g., Mn2+, Fe3+, V2+, Cr3+, and Mn4+.

In this paper we report on XAS measurements on monolayer (ML) NiO films which are grown on a Ag(100) substrate and capped by a 10 ML MgO(100) film. We have observed strong linear dichroism in the Ni L2,3 spectra, similar to that measured for thicker NiO films. From a detailed analysis, however, we discovered that the dichroism cannot be attributed to the presence of some form of magnetic order, but entirely to crystal-field effects. The analysis provides us also with a practical guide of how to disentangle the individual contributions to the linear dichroic signal, i.e., the contribution from magnetic interactions versus that from low-symmetry crystal fields. This is important for a reliable determination of, for instance, the spin moment orientation in NiO as well as LaFeO3, Fe2O3, VO, LaCrO3, Cr2O3, and Mn4+ manganate ultra thin films, surfaces and strained films, where the low-symmetry crystal-field splittings may not be negligible as compared to the exchange field energies.

![Energy level diagram for Ni2+ (3d8)](image)

**FIG. 1.** Energy level diagram for Ni2+ (3d8) in: (a) $O_h$ symmetry with $p_d \sigma = -1.29$ and $10Dq = 0.85$ eV; (b) $O_h$ symmetry with additional exchange field of 0.16 eV; (c) $D_{4h}$ symmetry with $p_d \sigma = -1.29$, $10Dq = 0.85$, and $D_s = 0.12$ eV; (d) $D_{4h}$ symmetry with additional exchange. The 3d spin–orbit interaction is included, but the states are labeled as if the spin–orbit interaction was not present.
FIG. 2. Experimental polarization dependent Ni $L_{2,3}$ XAS of 1 ML NiO(100) on Ag(100) covered with MgO(100). $\theta$ is the angle between the light polarization vector and the (001) surface normal ($\theta=90^\circ$ means normal light incidence).

The polarization-dependent XAS measurements were performed at the Dragon beamline of the NSRRC in Taiwan. The spectra were recorded using the total electron yield method in an XAS chamber with a base pressure of $3 \times 10^{-10}$ mbar. The photon energy resolution at the Ni $L_{2,3}$ edges ($h\nu=850$–880 eV) was set at 0.3 eV, and the degree of linear polarization was $\approx 98\%$. A NiO single crystal is measured simultaneously in a separate chamber upstream of the XAS chamber in order to obtain a relative energy reference with an accuracy of better than 0.02 eV. The 1 ML NiO film on Ag(100) was prepared in Groningen, by using NO$_2$ assisted molecular beam epitaxy. Immediately after the NiO growth, the sample was capped in situ with an epitaxial 10 ML MgO(100) film. Reflection high-energy electron diffraction (RHEED) intensity oscillations recorded during growth of thicker films demonstrated the layer-by-layer growth mode and provided an accurate thickness calibration.$^{16,17}$

Figure 2 shows the polarization-dependent Ni $L_{2,3}$ XAS spectra of the 1 ML NiO film, taken at room temperature. The angle between the light polarization vector and the (001) surface normal is given by $\theta$ ($\theta=90^\circ$ means normal light incidence). The general line shape of the spectra is very similar to that of thicker NiO films and bulk NiO.$^{5}$

Figure 3 presents a close-up of the $L_2$ edge, the region most often used to measure the magnitude of the magnetic linear dichroic effect in antiferromagnetic NiO films.$^{6$–$8,11$–$14}$

The spectra of the 1 ML NiO film show a very clear polarization dependence. This linear dichroic effect is as strong as that for a 20 ML NiO film grown on MgO(100) (taken from Alders et al.$^3$), albeit with an opposite sign, as can be seen from Fig. 3. Relying on the analysis by Alders et al.$^5$ for the antiferromagnetic 20 ML film, one may be tempted to conclude directly that the spin orientation in the 1 ML film is quite different from that of the 20 ML film, i.e., that the spins for the 1 ML would be lying more parallel to the interface while those of the thicker films are pointing more along the interface normal. However, Alders et al.$^5$ have also shown that the magnetic ordering temperature of NiO films decreases strongly if the film is made thinner. In fact, for a 5 ML NiO film on MgO(100), it was found that $T_N$ is around or below room temperature, i.e., that no linear dichroism can be observed at room temperature. A simple extrapolation will therefore suggest that 1 ML NiO will not be magnetically ordered at room temperature. This is in fact supported by the 80 K data of the 1 ML NiO on Ag(100) as shown in Figs. 3 and 4: the spectra and the dichroism therein are identical to those at 300 K, indicating that $T_N$ must be at least lower than 80 K.

In order to resolve the origin of the linear dichroism in the 1 ML NiO system, we now resort to the Ni $L_3$ part of the spectrum. A close-up of this region is given in Fig. 4. We can easily observe that the strong polarization dependence of the spectra is accompanied by an energy shift $\Delta E$ of 0.35 eV in the main peak of the $L_3$ white line. This shift seems small compared to the 852 eV photon energy being used, but it is very reproducible and well detectable since the photon energy calibration is done with an accuracy of better than 0.02 eV thanks to the simultaneous measurement of a NiO single crystal reference. We now take this energy shift as an indicator for the presence and strength of local crystal fields with a symmetry lower than $O_h$, i.e., crystal fields that do not split the ground state but do alter the energies of the XAS final states, and, via second-order processes, also causes spectral weight to be transferred between the various peaks as we will show below.
To understand the Ni $L_{2,3}$ spectra quantitatively, we perform calculations for the atomic $2p^6 3d^8 - 2p^5 3d^9$ transitions using a similar method as described by Alders et al., but now in a $D_{4h}$ point-group symmetry and including hybridization. The method uses the full atomic multiplet theory and includes the effects of the solid. It accounts for the intra-atomic $3d-3d$ and $2p-3d$ Coulomb and exchange interactions, the atomic $2p$ and $3d$ spin–orbit couplings, the $O_{h}$ $2p$–Ni $3d$ hybridization with $p_d\sigma = -1.29$ eV, and an $O_{h}$ crystal-field splitting of $10Dq = 0.85$ eV. The local symmetry for the Ni ion sandwiched between the Ag(100) substrate and the MgO(100) film is in principle $C_{4v}$, but for $d$ electrons one can ignore the odd part of the crystal field, so that effectively one can use the tetragonal $D_{4h}$ point-group symmetry. As we will explain below, the $D_{4h}$ parameters $D_s$ and $D_t$ (Ref. 18) are set to 0.12 and 0.00 eV, respectively, and the exchange field (acting on spins only) to zero. The calculations have been carried out using the XTLS 8.0 program. 

The right panel of Fig. 4 shows the calculated $L_{3}$ spectrum for the light polarization vector perpendicular and parallel to the $C_{4}$ axis ($\theta = 90^\circ$ and $\theta = 15^\circ$, respectively). One can clearly see that the major experimental features are well reproduced, including the 0.35 eV energy shift between the two polarizations. This shift can be understood in a single weak coupling approximation for the light polarization vector perpendicular and parallel to the $C_{4}$ axis. The major experimental feature is well reproduced, including the 0.35 eV energy shift between the two final states, one of $T'_2$ and one of $E'_{1}$ symmetry. The second peak is due to a final state of $T'_1$ symmetry. All three states have the $2p^5 3d_{x^2}$ configuration. If one reduces the crystal field to $D_{4h}$ symmetry, the peaks split. The $T'_2$ state will split into two states of $B'_2$ and $E'_{1}$ symmetry, the $E'_{1}$ into $A'_{1}$ and $B'_1$, and the $T'_1$ into $A'_{2}$ and $E'_{1}$. The energy splitting can be measured, but this is much easier done using the $L_{2}$ edge. We note that each of the two peaks in the $L_{2}$ edge will have a state of $E'_{1}$ symmetry, so that these two will mix and transfer spectral weight. This can be seen with isotropic light, but will show up more pronounced as a linear dichroic effect if polarized light is used.

In contrast to the 1 ML NiO case, the good agreement between theory and experiment for the polarization dependent spectra of a 20 ML NiO film have been achieved by assuming the presence of an antiferromagnetic order with an exchange field of about 0.16 eV in a pure local $O_{h}$ symmetry. It is surprising and also disturbing that a low-symmetry crystal field could induce a spectral weight transfer between the two peaks of the $L_{2}$ white line such that the resulting linear dichroism appears to be very similar as a dichroism of magnetic origin. It is obvious that the ratio between the two peaks cannot be taken as a direct measure of the spin orientation or magnitude of the exchange field in NiO films if one has not first established what the crystal-field contribution could be.

We now can identify two strategies for finding out which part of the linear dichroism is due to low-symmetry crystal-field effects. The first one is to study the temperature dependence as we have done above. Here, we have made use of the fact that those crystal fields do not split the high-spin ground state, so that there are no additional states to be occupied with different temperatures other than those already created by the presence of exchange fields. Thus, there should not be any temperature dependence in the crystal-field dichroism. The linear dichroism due to magnetism, however, is temperature dependent and scales with $\langle M^2 \rangle$. By going to temperatures high enough such that there is no longer any temperature dependence in the linear dichroism, i.e., when all magnetic ordering has been destroyed, one will find the pure crystal-field-induced dichroism.

The second strategy to determine the low-symmetry crystal-field contribution is to measure carefully the energy
shift $\Delta E$ in the main peak of the Ni $L_3$ white line for $\theta = 0^\circ$ vs $\theta = 90^\circ$. We now calculate the ratio between the two peaks of the Ni $L_2$ edge as a function of $\Delta E$, and the results are plotted in Fig. 5 for $\theta = 90^\circ$, $\theta = 0^\circ$, and $\theta = 54.7^\circ$ (isotropic spectrum). Since $\Delta E$ is a function of $Ds$ and $Dt$ combined, we have carried out the calculations with $Ds$ as a running variable for several fixed values of $Dt$, and plotted the resulting $L_2$ ratios vs $\Delta E$. We now can use Fig. 5 as a road map to determine how much of the linear dichroism in the Ni $L_2$ edge is due to crystal-field effects and how much due to magnetism. We can see directly that the 1 ML data lie on curves with the same $Dt$, meaning that the measured $L_2$ ratios are entirely due to crystal fields. The same can also be said for the 20 ML NiO on MgO at 528 K, which is not surprising since this temperature is above $T_N$. However, for the 20 ML NiO at 195 K, one can see that the data points do not lie on one of the $Dt$ curves (one may look for larger $Dt$ curves, but this results in line shapes very different from experiment) or let alone on curves with the same $Dt$, indicating that one needs magnetism to explain the $L_2$ ratios. In other words, knowing the $L_2$ ratio and $\Delta E$ together allows us to determine the magnitude of the exchange interaction and the orientation of the spin moments. It is best to use the $\theta = 0^\circ$ spectra, since here the $L_2$ ratio is determined almost by $\Delta E$ alone and is not too sensitive to the individual values of $Ds$ and $Dt$.

To conclude, we have observed strong linear dichroism in the 1 ML NiO on Ag, very similar to the well-known magnetic linear dichroism found for bulk-like antiferromagnetic NiO films. The dichroism in the 1 ML, however, cannot be attributed to the presence of some form of magnetic order, but entirely to crystal-field effects. We provide a detailed analysis and a practical guide of how to disentangle quantitatively the magnetic from the crystal-field contributions to the dichroic signal.

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15 Spin–orbit interaction in the 3$d^4$ shell will not split the $^3A_2$ ground state of a Ni $3d^4$ ion in $O_H$ symmetry. Spin–orbit coupling does split the $^3B_1$ state for a Ni ion in $D_{4h}$, but this splitting is negligibly small, of order $10^{-4}$ eV.