

WAVE-GUIDING STRUCTURE WITH LASING PROPERTIESBT PATENT CASE A24145 (SUBS)

This invention relates to wave-guiding structures and, more specifically, it relates to wave-guiding structures in which the lasing species is erbium, eg the ion Er^{3+} . The lasing species is contained in a silica based glass.

During the period 1985 - 1990 there has been substantial interest in the use of photonic amplifiers in telecommunications optical networks. This has included both semiconductor devices in which the primary source of power is electrical as well as wholly optical devices in which a signal at one optical wavelength is amplified and the power to drive the amplification is derived from a pump optical signal at a different frequency. The wholly optical devices can be configured in the form of a fibre wave-guide which is geometrically compatible with the transmission fibre in the telecommunications network. This geometrical compatibility confers substantial operating advantages and these advantages have given substantial technical significance to research into lasing structures and especially into lasing structures which can be implemented in the form of fibre.

Wavelengths in the range 1500nm to 1600nm have been recognised as particularly suitable for use in optical telecommunications and, therefore, photonic amplifiers which amplify at these wavelengths are of particular interest. It has been recognised that erbium, eg the ion Er^{3+} , will, when suitably pumped, lase at these wavelengths. Thus photonic amplifiers based on erbium as a lasing species have been extensively studied.

More recently it has been recognised that erbium contained in a host glass of silica and germania has an

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operational bandwidth which is undesirably narrow for some applications. For example, it may be desired to operate a frequency division multiplex which uses optical signals at both 1530nm and 1560nm. It has been found difficult to achieve satisfactory amplification at both of these wavelengths because of the narrow operational bandwidth of the erbium lasing species.

It has now been most surprisingly discovered that the operational bandwidth of the erbium can be increased to a satisfactory extent by the presence of only a small quantity of alumina in a host glass containing 3 - 30% mole of germanium in silica. The fact that the concentration of alumina is surprisingly low is of substantial operational importance because the alumina has very little effect on the other operational parameters of the wave-guide structure.

According to this invention the path region of a wave-guiding structure is wholly or partly formed of a laser composition which has 0.1ppm molar to 5000ppm molar of erbium contained in a host glass which consists essentially of SiO_2 , GeO_2 , Al_2O_3 and additives. In this composition the amount of the additive is less than 5% by weight, preferably less than 1% by weight. The path region contains x mole % of the GeO_2 and ax mole % of the Al_2O_3 wherein $x = 3 - 30$ and a is less than 0.35 (eg a is in the range 0.001 to 0.35), preferably $a = 0.01 - 0.25$, ie the mole ratio of Ge:Al is more than 2.8 and preferably Ge:Al = 1:0.01 - 0.25.

There are two major variants of this invention. In the first variant the path region is of approximately uniform composition and it consists entirely of the lasing composition.

In the second variant of the invention the composition of the path region is designed to be

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nonuniform. The concentration of the erbium is greater in the central path region than at the periphery thereof. Preferably the path region consists of two regions, namely an inner region and an outer region which surrounds the inner region. The inner region is preferably of approximately uniform composition and it consists entirely of the lasing composition as specified above. The outer region consists of a different glass which may have the same refractive index as the inner region. The inner region preferably constitutes not more than a quarter, eg 5⁰/o to 25⁰/o, of the cross-sectional area of the path region.

(The concept of non-uniformly distributed lasing additives in glass fibre wave-guides is disclosed in EP 313209 and to Japanese equivalent JP 89/145881. Co-pending applications were also filed on 13 October 1988 as US 257101 and CA 508531.)

The most important of the additives is phosphorous, which may be present in the fibre in the form of a phosphate. The presence of phosphorous reduces the viscosity of the glass which makes it possible to work at lower temperatures. The presence of the phosphorous in the core helps to reduce the risk of crystallisation by the Al₂O₃ and this crystallisation is a substantial risk in certain preparative techniques. At low concentrations of Al₂O₃ it is possible to avoid the use of phosphorous in the core.

The preferred configuration is an optical fibre in which the path region as specified above constitutes the whole of the core which is surrounded by a cladding of a different glass composition which has a lower refractive index than the core. The preferred cladding glass composition is pure silica, optionally containing melting point depressants such as phosphorous and fluorine to control the refractive index.

As well as the fibre per se, the invention includes photonic amplifiers comprising a lasing length of fibre according to the invention coupled to a pump for

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providing pump radiation to excite the erbium into an inverted population state suitable for sustaining the lasing process.

Several different wavelengths are suitable for use as a pump radiation, these include 514nm, 650nm, 800nm, 980nm, and 1480nm (these figures should be regarded as having a tolerance of ± 25 nm). Of these five wavelengths 980nm and 1480nm are regarded as particularly suitable.

The laser length of the fibre is related to the available pump power and the concentration of the erbium. A higher pump power enables a longer laser length to be used and lower erbium concentrations are also related to a longer laser length. Recent experience suggests that better amplification is achieved by using relatively low erbium concentrations and relatively long laser lengths, ie the gain per metre is small but a high total gain is achieved by using a long laser length. It is considered that adequate gain is unlikely to be achieved with laser lengths of less than 0.5m whereas it would be difficult to propagate pump radiation over laser lengths of more than 10km. For most purposes it is considered that laser lengths of 1m - 200m, preferably 10m - 50m, would be appropriate.

The invention also includes telecommunications systems which comprise an amplifier as defined above having the input and output fibres operatively coupled to input and output transmission fibre.

It will be appreciated that a telecommunications system, eg a submarine system, is complicated, important and expensive technology and, therefore, its components are individually designed for the system's specific requirements. The most important requirements which affect the amplifying fibre are:-

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- (a) that the amplifying fibre shall match, as closely as possible, the transmission properties of the transmission fibre, and
- (b) the amplifying fibre must support lasing transitions to give a high gain for a low pump power. It is also important to minimise, and preferably eliminate, any tendency to oscillate which means that it is important to minimise reflection at the two ends of the laser lengths.

Requirement (a) indicates that the core of the amplifying fibre be of similar size as the core of the transmission fibre. It is easy to appreciate that mis-matched core sizes will cause signals to be lost at either the input or the output end. It is also convenient that the external diameters be the same which implies that the claddings are the same. Matching the cladding sizes is less important than matching the core size.

Requirement (a) also indicates that the optical properties be matched, ie that the refractive indices be the same. (It will be appreciated that a refractive index step in a path tends to cause unwanted reflections.) The difference between the refractive indices of core and cladding is an important performance parameter but individually matching the core and cladding indices also matches the difference. In the case of the cladding it is possible, and usually desirable, to utilise the same composition for both transmission and amplifying fibre. The composition is usually SiO_2 with P and F as additives.

Requirement (b) necessitates that a laser additive, ie erbium or Er^{3+} , is present in the core of the amplifying fibre and this prevents the same core



compositions being used in transmission and amplifying fibre. The transmission fibre usually has a core of silica/germania glass and this can be used as the host glass in the amplifying fibre. The concentration of erbium is adjusted to give the desired laser power but the bandwidth is less than ideal. The bandwidth can be made wider by introducing alumina into the core. Adjusting the Ge:Al ratio within the ranges stated enables a desired bandwidth to be achieved. The alumina increases the refractive index so it will be necessary to adjust the germania content to obtain an exact index match between cores of transmission and amplifying fibre. In some instances it may be appropriate to introduce phosphorous to help stabilise the composition and this may also require adjustment of the germania to achieve an index match.

(If a fibre with two regions in the core is used, the outer region conveniently has the same composition as the core of the transmission fibre and the above considerations apply to the inner zone.)

One method of making optical fibre wave-guides according to the invention utilises the modified chemical vapour deposition process usually identified as MCVD. MCVD is sometimes known as inside deposition process because the glasses which eventually form the operative part of the fibre are produced by converting the equivalent chlorides into the desired oxides which are deposited, layer by layer, on the inner surface of a substrate tube. Usually a total of 10 - 30 layers are deposited. As initially deposited, the glass is porous but the porous material is immediately fused to give a solid layer upon which subsequent layers are deposited. When all the layers have been deposited the tube is collapsed into a rod which is drawn into fibre.

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To make fibre according to this invention this procedure is followed for the cladding but a precursor of the core is deposited but left in the porous state. The erbium and the aluminium are introduced as solution into the porous layers. After solvent removal and conversion to oxides is necessary, the porous layer is consolidated and the tubular configuration is collapsed into a rod which is then drawn into fibre. It should be noted that the introduction of additives by soaking the porous layers is a well-known modification of the MCVD process.

Other methods of making the fibre include:

- 1) The vapour axial deposition (VAD) technique whereby a porous boule of doped silica is fused into a rare-earth doped boule by fusing at approximately 1200 - 1400°C in an atmosphere of the rare-earth chloride. Alternatively the boule can be soaked in an alcoholic solution as described in the MCVD technique above. The fused doped boule is surrounded by a cladding glass and drawn into fibre.
- 2) The outside vapour deposition (OVD) technique has also been reported to make rare-earth doped fibre. This is similar to the VAD process, but the rare-earth dopant is introduced into the boule during the deposition process from an organo-metallic source.

The invention will now be described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 illustrates a fibre according to the invention made by the MCVD process and having an uniform core;

Figure 2 illustrates an alternative form of fibre made by the MCVD process and having a core



consisting of an inner and an outer zone; and Figure 3 illustrates an amplifier configuration.

The preferred embodiment of the invention, as shown in Figure 1, is a fibre which has a residual layer 10 which is the residue of the substrate tube used in the MCVD process. Inside the residual layer 10 the fibre has a conventional cladding 11. The residual layer 10 consists of substantially pure silica glass and the cladding region 11 consists of silica glass, usually having a slightly higher purity than that of the residual layer 10, but containing phosphorous and fluorine as dopants to reduce the melting point of the silica in order to facilitate processing. The phosphorous slightly increases the refractive index of the cladding but the fluorine slightly reduces the refractive index. The ratio of F/P is adjusted so that the refractive index of the cladding 11 is substantially equal to the refractive index of the residual layer 10. This ensures that the two layers 10 and 11 function as a single cladding in the optical wave-guide. In some instances excess F is introduced into the cladding glass to produce a low index material.

The core region 12 is of uniform composition and it is formed of a silica/germania glass which contains Er^{3+} as the lasing additive and alumina to adjust the lasing bandwidth of the Er^{3+} . The composition of the core 12 will be further specified in examples given below.

An alternative form of fibre according to the invention, which is shown in Figure 2, includes the same layers 10 and 11 as shown in Figure 1. However, the core comprises an outer region 13 which surrounds an inner region 14. The outer region 13 consists of a

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silica/germanium glass and the inner region 14 also contains alumina and the lasing species Er^{3+} . It should be noted that there is no lasing species and no aluminium in the outer region 13.

Fibre as illustrated in Figure 1 was prepared by a substantially conventional MCVD process in which a substrate tube was rotated in a glass blowing lathe while a reactant gas was passed through its bore. In the course of the preparation two different reactant mixtures, to be specified below, were used.

A short segment of tube, about 2cm long, was heated to reaction temperature by a travelling flame. In this segment chlorides were converted into oxides which deposited as a porous ring downstream of the flame. As the flame traversed, in the case of cladding, the deposit was fused to form a thin layer on the inner surface of the substrate tube. In the case of the core, a lower temperature was used so that the deposit did not fuse whereby it remained porous.

The reaction mixture used to form the cladding precursor was obtained by bubbling:-

700ml/min of O_2 through SiCl_4 ,

90ml/min of O_2 through POCl_3 .

The mixture of these two gas streams was diluted with 1.5 litre/min O_2 and 1.0 litre/min He. In addition, 2.5 ml/min of CCl_2F_2 were included in the mixture. The maximum temperature in the hot zone was 1600°C and the flame travelled at 18cm/min. The ratio of F:P was chosen so that the RI of the cladding was equal to that of the substrate tube.

Ten cladding layers were thus deposited on a substrate tube of 10mm inner diameter. These fused together to form a cladding layer of SiO_2 doped with P_2O_5 and fluoride.

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Three layers to form the core were deposited next. The reaction mixture used for each layer was obtained by bubbling:-

100 ml/min at O_2 through $SiCl_4$

120 ml/min of O_2 through $GeCl_4$

10 ml/min of O_2 through $POCl_3$.

The mixture of these three gas streams was diluted with 1.5 litres/min of O_2 . The torch traverse rate was 17 cm/min and the maximum temperature was at $1300^\circ C$ (which is too low to fuse the deposit).

(Note. In all bubbling operations the liquid was at $25^\circ C$.) At this point the tube was removed from the lathe and dopants were introduced into the porous layers by immersion for 1 hour in an aqueous solution of

0.65 M $AlCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$

0.002 M $ErCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$

(Note, alcoholic solutions are also suitable.)

After soaking, the tube was drained, blown dry with N_2 for one hour, and returned to the lathe where it was heated at about $800^\circ - 1000^\circ C$ for a few minutes. This completed solvent evaporation. The temperature was raised to about $1900^\circ C$ for collapse to a rod. This also ensured conversion of $AlCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ to Al_2O_3 and $ErCl_3$ to Er_2O_3 . The tube was flushed with O_2/He mixture during all of these stages (about 10% volume of Cl_2 is advantageously introduced into the O_2/He mix to assist in obtaining a dry product.)

The resulting preform was drawn to a fibre as specified in Table I.

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TABLE I

Cladding (11)

OD	15.7 μ m
ID	5.4 μ m
RI	matched to silica

Core (12)

Diameter	5.4 μ m
Ge	7.5 wt ⁰ /o
Al	0.35 wt ⁰ /o
Er ³⁺	500ppm
SiO ₂	balance
Mole ratio Al:Ge=0.1:1	

General Properties

OD	120 μ m
LP ₁₁ Cut Off	1240nm
RI step	.016

A fibre as illustrated in Figure 2 was prepared by a method similar to that described above. A cladding consisting of 20 layers was prepared using the reactants designated above and this was followed by the deposition of 3 layers of SiO₂/GeO₂ each of which was fused as it was deposited. Finally, 3 layers of SiO₂/GeO₂ were deposited and left in the porous state. These layers were soaked with aluminium nitrate and erbium chloride as described above. After soaking, the tubular structure was converted to fibre using a method as described above.

Figure 3 shows an amplifier using the fibre specified in Table 1 as the amplifying medium 32. The amplifier comprises an input transmission fibre 30 fusion-linked at 34 to 20m of amplifying fibre 32 which is also linked, at 33, to output transmission fibre 31.

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Both transmission fibres 30 and 31 have silica glass claddings and germania/silica glass cores. A pump 37, which provides pump radiation at 1480nm, is connected to link fibre 36 which forms a wavelength selective fused fibre coupler 35 with the input transmission fibre 30. The coupler 35 passes the pump radiation at 1480nm into the amplifying 32 but it does not take out signals at 1530nm to 1560nm.

Using pump power of 70mW the amplifier gave a gain of 30dB for signals at 1550nm. More specifically, it amplified an input power of 0.01mW to an output power of 10mW. The "full-width half-maximum" bandwidth was measured for this amplifier. This measurement specifies the bandwidth, in nanometres, over which the gain is at least half the maximum gain available. For the amplifier shown in Figure 3 the FWHM bandwidth was 35nm (and the specific amplifications at two wavelengths of interest, namely 1530nm and 1560nm, was 27dB or better).

The effect of the Ge:Al ratio can be illustrated by the fluorescent spectra of silica/german/alumina glasses since it is the performance of the glass which is exploited in the fibre. The FWHM bandwidth of fluorescence, ie the bandwidth over which the fluorescence is half the maximum, is similar to the figures quoted above and it can be used as a guide to fibre performance. Values for glasses with five different Ge:Al ratios are given in Table 2.

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TABLE 2

Mole Ratio		FWHM
Ge : Al		
1	0	26.5nm
1	0.03	37nm
1	0.10	43nm
1	0.35	46nm
0	1	47nm

Table 2 indicates that the maximum bandwidth is achieved in glasses which contain silica and alumina with no germania. However, bandwidth is not the only consideration which affects the performance of amplifying fibre. Other properties, and particularly the excess attenuation and compatability must also be taken into account. In respect of these properties alumina is undesirable and the use of fibre with high alumina content is, in many applications, not acceptable.

The "excess" attenuation of a laser fibre is that part of the attenuation which is comparable to the attenuation of transmission fibre but the attenuation of both the pump wavelength and the signal wavelength must be taken into account. The erbium, ie the laser additive, is intended to interact with both pump and signal wavelengths. Pump radiation is clearly, and intentionally, attenuated by the lasing process but there may also be undesired additional attenuation, eg caused by mechanisms similar to the mechanisms which cause attenuation transmission fibre, which constitute the "excess" pump attenuation. The signal wavelength can also be absorbed by the erbium but, in normal laser operation, the erbium is excited by the pump

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radiation so that amplification occurs. However, there are still additional mechanisms similar to the attenuation in transmission fibre and these additional mechanisms constitute the "excess" attenuation signal.

Many telecommunications networks use silica/germania fibre and, therefore, there is a requirement for laser fibre based on silica/germania to achieve compatibility with the transmission fibre in the rest of the network. The presence of large proportions of alumina would cause excess attenuation. Table 2 indicates that a mole ratio Ge:Al equals 1:0.35 gives nearly the same bandwidth as a silica alumina fibre whereas this small proportion of alumina has relatively little effect upon the excess attenuation and other transmission properties of the fibre. Table 2 also indicates that very low, eg Ge:Al ratio below 1:0.01, can give very slight enhancement of the bandwidth which may be appropriate in certain circumstances where it is necessary to affect only minimally the transmission properties of the fibre. However, for most purposes it is considered that mole ratios above Ge:Al equals 1:0.01 would be acceptable.

When laser amplifiers in the form of fibre were first suggested it was considered that very short lengths of fibre, eg below 0.5m, would be appropriate and, in these circumstances, the excess attenuation of the laser fibre is unimportant because of the short distance. It has now been realised that there are substantial advantages in performing the amplification over longer distances. Distances of 10m - 200m are under present consideration and it is believed that in the future even longer distances, eg up to 2km may be appropriate. At these long laser lengths the effect of excess attenuation becomes important and it is even possible that the excess attenuation could nullify the amplification. It is, therefore, important to provide laser fibre with very low excess attenuation.

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CLAIMS

1. An optical wave-guide suitable for use as a photonic amplifier, in which at least a part of the path region is formed of a lasing composition being a silica/germania glass which contains 0.1 - 5000ppm molar of erbium as a lasing additive and alumina to adjust the bandwidth of operation of the erbium, wherein the mole ratio of Ge:Al is more than 2.8.
2. An optical wave-guide according to claim 1, wherein the mole ratio Ge:Al is 1:0.01 to 0.25.
3. An optical wave-guide according to either claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the silica/germania glass contains 3 - 30% mole of germania.
4. An optical wave-guide according to any one of claim 1, claim 2 or claim 3, wherein the whole of the path region is formed of said lasing composition.
5. An optical wave-guide according to claim 4, wherein the concentration of the aluminium and the erbium is uniform throughout the path region.
6. An optical wave-guide according to any one of claim 1, claim 2 or claim 3, in which the path region consists of an outer region which surrounds an inner region and said inner region has a higher concentration of erbium than the outer region.
7. An optical wave-guide according to claim 5, in which the outer region contains no erbium.
8. An optical wave-guide according to any one of the preceding claims, in which the wave-guide takes the form of a fibre and the path region is the core of said fibre.
9. An optical fibre wave-guide suitable for use as a photonic amplifier, which fibre wave-guide comprises a cladding formed of a first glass composition having a refractive index n_1 and said cladding surrounds a core



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which is formed of a second glass composition having a refractive index n_2 wherein n_2 is greater than n_1 , and said first glass composition is based on silica and said second glass composition is based on a silica/germania with 0.1 - 5000ppm mole of erbium as a lasing additive and alumina to adjust the bandwidth of operation of the erbium, wherein the mole ratio of Ge:Al is more than 2.8.

10. An optical fibre wave-guide according to claim 9, wherein the mole ratio of Ge:Al is 1:0.01 - 0.25.

11. An optical fibre wave-guide according to either claim 9 or claim 10, wherein $n_2 - n_1$ is between 0.003 and 0.04.

12. A glass fibre according to any one of claims 9-11, wherein the first glass composition contains fluorine and phosphorous to reduce the melting point of the silica glass composition.

13. A glass fibre according to any one of claims 9-12, wherein the second glass composition contains 3 - 30% mole of germania.

14. An optical fibre wave-guide suitable for use as a photonic amplifier, which fibre comprises:

- (a) a cladding region formed of a first silica glass composition having a refractive index n_1 ;
- (b) an outer core region surrounded by said cladding region and formed of a silica/germania glass composition having a refractive index n_2 , wherein n_2 is greater than n_1 ; and
- (c) an inner core region surrounded by said outer core region and formed of a third glass composition having a refractive index n_3 , wherein n_3 is not greater than n_2 and said third glass composition is a silica/germania glass which contains 0.1 - 5000ppm



mole of erbium as a lasing additive and alumina to adjust the bandwidth of operation of the erbium, wherein the mole ratio of Ge:Al is more than 2.8.

15. An optical fibre wave-guide according to claim 14, wherein the value of $n_2 - n_1$ is between 0.003 and 0.04 and the value of n_3 is between the values of n_1 and n_2 .
16. An optical fibre according to either claim 14 or claim 15, wherein the mole ratio Ge:Al is 1:001 to 0.25.
17. An optical fibre according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the core contains substantially no phosphorous.
18. An optical amplifier which comprises an input transmission fibre optically coupled to an amplifying fibre which is also optically coupled to an output transmission fibre, said amplifying fibre being optically matched to said input and output fibres whereby the amplifier is adapted to receive attenuated signals via the input fibre and to provide amplified signals at the output fibre, and also wherein the amplifying fibre is optically coupled to pump means for supplying pump radiation to provide power for the amplification; characterised in that said amplifying fibre is 1m to 1,000m long, and it consists of a fibre as defined in any one of claims 8 to 16.
19. An optical amplifier according to claim 18, wherein the amplifying fibre is 10m to 200m long.

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