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Published
2008

Journal Title
Optics Letters

DOI
https://doi.org/10.1364/OL.33.002107

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Optical parametric generation of nearly transform-limited mid-infrared pulses in dispersion-engineered nonlinear waveguides

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Received July 2, 2008; revised July 31, 2008; accepted August 6, 2008; posted August 12, 2008 (Doc. ID 98250); published September 11, 2008

Optical parametric generation in dispersion-engineered waveguides fabricated by proton exchange in periodically poled lithium niobate is numerically investigated as a means for producing widely tunable mid-infrared ultrashort pulses starting from low energy pump pulses at a 1.55 μm wavelength and with 100 fs duration, which are typical parameters of amplified Er-fiber oscillators. Numerical evidence is given about the generation of sub-100 fs nearly transform-limited pulses in the 2.4–4.4 μm spectral range. © 2008 Optical Society of America

OCIS codes: 190.4390, 190.4975, 130.3060.

The generation of ultrashort pulses in the mid-infrared spectral region at a hundreds of megahertz repetition rate is of major interest for several studies of vibrational relaxation dynamics [1]. Optical parametric oscillators (OPOs) are generally the preferred choice for this purpose owing to wide tunability and high output power [2,3]. However, OPOs suffer from a costly and complex architecture requiring the synchronization of two optical cavities and, moreover, they hardly allow for a temporal resolution below 100 fs. An alternative recent scheme is represented by supercontinuum seeded optical parametric amplifiers in the megahertz regime [4–6], whose main drawback relies upon the need of using optical fibers for the generation of octave-spanning seed pulses.

A simpler and more robust solution is provided by optical parametric generation (OPG) processes in periodically poled materials, which require neither external resonators nor seed pulses [7,8]. The main difficulty is here represented by the fact that, unless using proper conditions of group-velocity-mismatch (GVM) between pump, signal, and idler pulses [9], the OPG pulses exhibit poor temporal properties, with time-bandwidth products (TBPs) higher or much higher than one. Since the GVM conditions of the commonly adopted periodically poled materials are very similar to one another, there does not exist any degree of freedom for modifying appreciably the GVM in bulk configuration. Nonlinear guiding media, on the contrary, offer a higher flexibility. Two schemes in particular have been proposed, one exploiting a quasi-group-velocity matching between the interacting modes [10], the other realizing a sum-frequency generation process in cascade to the OPG one [11]. Both schemes have been shown to lead to very low TBPs, but they are applicable only in a very limited signal (idler) spectral range.

In this Letter we numerically show that by using annealed-proton-exchanged (APE) waveguides fabricated in periodically poled lithium niobate (PPLN) with an engineered refractive index profile, the OPG process can lead to very low TBPs for both the signal and idler pulses in a broad spectral region, from 2.4 to 4.4 μm, when pumped by an amplified Er-fiber oscillator with typical values of pulse energy (nanojoule level), pulse duration (100 fs), and carrier wavelength (1.55 μm). This result is achieved by modeling the dispersion properties of the interacting modes so that the pump-signal GVM has an opposite sign with respect to the pump-idler GVM for all possible combinations of signal and idler wavelengths.

Let us assume a pump field with central wavelength λp to be injected in a periodically poled medium with an optical power sufficiently high to amplify—starting from quantum noise—two more fields called signal and idler at wavelengths λs and λi, with λs and λi related to λp by the energy conservation law 1/λp=1/λs+1/λi, and by the quasi-phase-matching condition k−k−k−2π/Λ=0. k, ks, and k are the pump, signal, and idler wave vectors, and Λ is the poling period. When numerically solving the nonlinear time-dependent propagation equations, one finds that the temporal coherence of the generated pulses, which in turn is related to the TBP, is strongly affected by the GVM between the pulses. The lowest TBPs are reached whenever the ratio δps/δpi is between 0 and −1, where δps=1/vgp−1/vgp and δpi=1/vgi−1/vgp, and vgp, vgi, and vgp, vgi, vgi are the group velocity of pump, signal, and idler, respectively. For any nonlinear material there exists only one pump wavelength, λp, allowing the above condition to be satisfied for all signal (idler) wavelengths, with λp and 2λp (degeneracy) being located at opposite positions with respect to the zero-dispersion wavelength of the material, where the group velocity is maximum. The dashed curve in Fig. 1 reports δps and δpi as a function of the signal wavelength for PPLN when adopting the corresponding λp value, equal to 1.35 μm at 20°C; the ratio δps/δpi remains between 0 and −1 from the singularity point occurring at degeneracy, where vgp=vgi=vgp, up to the material transparency limit for the idler beam, with strong benefits...
their representation. The properties are mostly related to depth. The solid curve in
formed in one dimension, since the dispersion prop-
noise model described in [13]. Close to degeneracy,
in plane-waves approximation using signal and idler
with respect to bulk PPLN.

2.108

for the TBP. The above $\tilde{\lambda}_p$ does not correspond, however, to the emission wavelength of any commonly adopted oscillator, it can hardly be tuned by acting on the crystal temperature, and it scarcely depends on the choice of the crystal (periodically poled potassium titanyl phosphate presents, e.g., $\tilde{\lambda}_p = 1.26 \mu m$).

With a guiding structure on top of a given material the dispersion properties can be tailored through the control of the dispersion contribution provided by the waveguide index profile. In conventional guiding structures this contribution is positive, providing a redshift of the zero-dispersion wavelength with re-
spect to the bulk. Consequently $\tilde{\lambda}_p$ is also redshifted by an amount that can be controlled by engineering the waveguide refractive index profile. A PPLN-APE waveguide giving $\tilde{\lambda}_p = 1.55 \mu m$, i.e., in coincidence with the emission wavelength of a conventional Er-
ner oscillator, was designed using the diffusion model described in [12]. The simulations were per-
formed in one dimension, since the dispersion prop-
tities are mostly related to depth. The solid curve in Fig. 1 gives $\delta_{ps}$ and $\delta_{pl}$ as calculated for the TM$_0$ modes of the designed waveguide when pumping at $1.55 \mu m$; as expected, the two parameters have the opposite sign for all signal wavelengths. The waveguide is characterized by a proton-exchange depth of $1.8 \mu m$ and an annealing time of $5.4$ h at $350^\circ C$, giving rise to the refractive index profile reported in the inset of Fig. 1; the high index change at the surface, $\sim 0.05$, is consistent with the shift of $\tilde{\lambda}_p$ by $\sim 200$ nm with respect to bulk PPLN.

The simulation of the OPG process was carried out in plane-waves approximation using signal and idler input conditions defined according to the quantum-
noise model described in [13]. Close to degeneracy, where signal and idler spectra are superimposed onto each other, only one field has been considered for their representation. The $d_{33}$ nonlinear coefficient was prudently kept equal to $17$ pm/V. For the pump pulse, we considered a Gaussian temporal profile with an intensity FWHM of $100$ fs, which is a typical value for commercial Er-fiber sources. The pump in-
tensity threshold of the OPG process was defined by the value giving a signal (idler) gain of $5 \times 10^3$, to be compared with a saturation gain around $10^{10}$. The simulations were performed for signal wavelengths between $2.4 \mu m$ (idler at $\sim 4.4 \mu m$) and $3.1 \mu m$ (de-
generacy) with poling periods (top scale of Fig. 1) sat-
sifying the first-order quasi-phase-matching condi-
tion.

Figure 2 reports the energy threshold calculated for a $25$ mm long waveguide using the dispersion properties described above. The energy threshold level remains substantially unaltered and well below $1$ nJ around degeneracy, while it rapidly increases at the edge of the spectral range. This behavior can be attributed to the combined effect of (i) the GVM be-
tween the pump and idler modes, which increases rapidly when approaching the transparency limit of the material (see Fig. 1) and (ii) the field overlap be-
tween the interacting modes, which strongly decreases far from degeneracy owing to the low confine-
ment of the idler mode at long wavelengths (the fields profiles entering the overlap integral were calculated with a 2D mode solver by assuming a $15$ $\mu m$ wide waveguide). To quantify the main features of the generated signal and idler pulses, the respective spectral and temporal widths were evaluated according to the formula $\sigma^2_{\bar{\xi}}=\int[I(\bar{\xi})]d\bar{\xi}/\int[I(\bar{\xi})]d\bar{\xi}$, where $I_\xi$ is the intensity profile in the time domain when $\bar{\xi} = \tau$, or in the frequency domain when $\bar{\xi} = \nu$, and $\bar{\xi}$ indicates the barycenter of the profile. It is well known that the product $\sigma_\tau \cdot \sigma_\nu$ equals $4\pi$ when Gaussian coherent pulses are present and exceeds this value in all other cases by an amount depending on both the specific field profile and coherence of the field itself. Therefore the ratio $\sigma_\tau \cdot \sigma_\nu/4\pi$ is an indicator of the TBP. Figure 3 reports the TBP values (filled squares) for different signal wavelengths and their idler counterparts along with a quadratic fitting curve acting as a reference line (solid curves). The TBP remains ex-
tremely close to unity for almost all wavelengths, in-
dicating that the generated pulses are nearly transform-limited in a broad spectral range. The

Fig. 1. Pump-signal and -idler temporal walk-off as a function of signal wavelength, as calculated at a $1.35 \mu m$ pump wavelength for PPLN (dashed curve) and at $1.55 \mu m$ pump for the TM$_0$ modes of the designed PPLN-APE wave-
guide (solid curve). Inset, refractive index profile of the waveguide at $1.55 \mu m$. Top scale, poling periods giving quasi-phase-matching for the waveguide.

Fig. 2. OPG energy threshold as a function of signal wave-
length (bottom axis) and corresponding idler wavelength (top axis). The solid curve acts as a guide to the eye.
rapid increase of the idler’s TBP at longer wavelengths. This behavior is not due to a coherence defect occurring at longer wavelengths but simply to the higher amount of dispersion close to the transparency edge of the material. The only out-of-scale couple of points that is not reported in the figure was obtained for $\lambda_2 = 2.9 \text{ m}$, corresponding to $\lambda_1 = 3.33 \text{ m}$; in this case, in fact, as evidenced by the dotted curve in Fig. 4, signal and idler spectra overlap each other, giving rise to a TBP value as high as 3.4. This does not occur at shorter signal wavelengths, where signal and idler spectra are well separated, or at longer signal wavelengths, where signal and idler pulses become indistinguishable (dashed curve spectrum in Fig. 4). In the temporal domain this transition does not give rise to any discontinuity, as also evidenced by the behavior shown in Fig. 3, where the filled circles are the numerically calculated FWHM pulse widths. The pulse width attains near degeneracy a minimum of 58 fs, ~1.7 times shorter than the input pump pulse width, which is a typical narrowing factor in low pump depletion conditions.

It is worth noting that the experimental implementation of the proposed study is expected to give the best results in buried waveguides fabricated by reverse-proton-exchange or in ridge waveguides fabricated by direct bonding, since these can provide at the same time an improved field overlap between the interacting modes, a more efficient coupling of the pump pulses into the TM$_{00}$ mode, and also a reduced degradation of the nonlinearity in the guiding region.

In conclusion, nearly transform-limited pulses with excellent spatial quality, duration around 100 fs, and broad tunability in the mid-infrared region are numerically demonstrated to be synthesized by optical parametric generation in dispersion-engineered PPLN-APE waveguides. This result shows, for the first time to our knowledge, the applicative potential of optical waveguides in the field of ultrashort pulses, traditionally related to bulk materials.

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