



Development of Advanced Semiconductor Materials and Devices For Next Generation Photovoltaics: Opportunities And Challenges

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Abstract

Renewable energy production is a key component in the drive towards a safe, secure energy supply for future low-carbon economies. Using energy from the sun to generate electricity provides a sustainable source of free, abundant, safe, clean energy, without use of any fossil fuels and without waste or pollution.

Solar cells (photovoltaic cells) are made of semiconductor materials that convert energy from the sun directly into electrical energy. Sunlight consists of a spectrum of different wavelengths (colours) of light, each corresponding to a different energy level. Semiconductor materials can only convert sunlight of specific wavelengths and energy into electrical energy. Remaining energy from the sun is lost. Existing semiconductors cannot utilise the entire spectrum distribution of sunlight. The strategy to increase the efficiency of solar cells is to use semiconductors optimised for different wavelength ranges of the spectrum.

Existing 'three junction' solar cells, which utilise three different semiconductors, are capable of converting sunlight from three regions of the spectrum into electrical energy. The drawback is that state of the art solar cells currently only convert 33% of solar energy into electricity. There is a great interest worldwide into developing innovative semiconductor materials capable of converting sunlight from a fourth specific portion of the solar spectrum into electrical energy. Retrofitting this fourth generation material onto current solar cells should significantly improve solar cell efficiency to >60%.

Currently a wide range of semiconductors is explored for their potential use in photovoltaic applications. However, solar cells are already an important part of our lives. The simplest systems power many of the small calculators and wristwatches. The complicated systems provide electricity for pumping water, powering communications equipment, and even lighting our homes and running our appliances. With the growth of the satellite industry and the increase of power requirements, larger solar arrays are needed to produce the required power. The familiar wings of most modern satellites are made of solar arrays.

In this talk, I will give an overview of the principles of solar cells, the properties of semiconductors suitable for solar cells, and some selected recent achievements in III-V solar cells.