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Originalbeitrag erschienen in:
Physical review letters 67 (1991), S. 2435-2438
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(Received 1 July 1991)

First experiments are described on the impact of additive noise on the ionization of Rb Rydberg atoms in microwave fields. Dynamical localization and its gradual destruction by noise are observed. The threshold and time dependence of the ionization process are investigated in the presence as well as in the absence of noise. Purely stochastic excitation induces a diffusionlike behavior which might be interpreted as restoration of the classical limit.

PACS numbers: 32.80.Rm, 03.65.—w, 42.50.—p

The study of the time evolution of a quantum system whose classical counterpart exhibits chaotic dynamics has received a great deal of attention in recent years. One of the most prominent features of some of these systems, known as “dynamical localization,” is that their quantum evolution follows the diffusive classical dynamics only initially, whereas after a certain break time, quantum-mechanical coherence effects can change the dynamics considerably [1]. Experiments performed to test this striking phenomenon investigated the population change and the ionization process of Rydberg atoms induced by strong microwave fields [2–4], and there have been found several approaches of theoretical interpretation [3–7]. In several papers it has been discussed that the presence of noise can change significantly the dynamics of the excitation process [4,8–10]. In this Letter, we report on the first experimental studies of the ionization process of rubidium Rydberg atoms in the presence of monochromatic and/or stochastic microwave fields. We show that the presence of a small amount of noise decreases the ionization thresholds in the regime of localization. Furthermore, the functional form of the quantum diffusion coefficient $D_q$ describing the ionization process could be determined for the first time.

Our experimental setup is basically identical to the one described in Ref. [4]. We only recall here that the experimental geometry allows for a well-defined microwave interaction time being continuously adjustable from roughly 10 ns to about 10 μs. The atoms experience a microwave pulse with a flat top, the switch-on and -off time of which is close to 6 ns. The coherent microwave source used was a Systron-Donner Model 1720, 0.05–18-GHz synthesizer which delivers a microwave signal of high spectral purity (higher harmonics and broadband noise are at least 55 dB below the carrier; the linewidth of the continuous microwave signal is smaller than 30 Hz). The noise source is a traveling-wave-tube amplifier for the frequency range between 8 and 18 GHz (variation of the output signal in the plateau of the amplifier characteristic is below 10 dB) which can be considered as an emitter of white noise. The linear polarization vector of the microwave radiation lies parallel to the atomic beam direction.

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In our experiments we measured the ionization probability $P$ of rubidium Rydberg atoms which were subjected to (a) a coherent microwave signal ($\nu=8867$ MHz), (b) a monochromatic field plus added broadband noise (bandwidth 8–18 GHz), or (c) a pure broadband noise signal. The ionization probability is detected as a function of the microwave field amplitude $E$ (cases (a) and (b)) or as a function of the root-mean-square value of the average microwave power $\epsilon_\nu$ (case (c)). In all cases we determined the 10% ionization threshold fields $E_{10%}$ from the experimental results.

In the experiments on the ionization probability of rubidium Rydberg atoms in an intense monochromatic field plus a broadband microwave noise the integral power of the stochastic component, when present, was always at least 20 dB below the power of the monochromatic field.
The atoms were prepared in an initial Rydberg state, with principal quantum numbers \( n_0 \) between 55 and 95 for the pure monochromatic case and between 60 and 91 when broadband noise was added to the microwave signal. For all measurements the monochromatic signal had a frequency of 8867 MHz and the interaction time was fixed to 5 \( \mu \)s. In Fig. 1 the normalized ionization thresholds \( \alpha_{10\%} = \alpha_{(10\%)}(n_0) \) are plotted as a function of frequency \( (n_0) \) is the effective quantum number). For comparison with theory, usually the scaled frequency \( \omega_0 \) is used, corresponding to the ratio between the applied microwave frequency and the Kepler frequency, which can be easily calculated in the case of the hydrogen spectrum. In the case of an alkaline spectrum where we have a large \( l \) splitting we have to pay attention to the problem of which frequency we use for normalization. We have plotted two alternative ways of normalization which correspond to the two nearest dipole-allowed upward transitions starting from a \( p \) state, being \( np \rightarrow (n+1)s \) and \( np \rightarrow (n-1)d \). This semiempirical definition of the scaled frequency for rubidium, which gives qualitatively the same results as an averaging argument used in earlier work (see, e.g., Ref. [4]), is useful for a qualitative comparison with results obtained by hydrogen experiments and appropriate from the viewpoint of atomic physics. However, it should be clearly distinguished from the notion of the scaling properties of the classical Hamiltonian which arise as a consequence of the Coulomb potential present in the hydrogen problem and which are no longer exact for the non-Coulombic core potentials of alkaline atoms. For the monochromatic case (solid line) there is an increase of the ionization threshold as a function of the scaled frequency, showing the localization phenomenon. With an increasing noise level the resulting ionization field strength shows a smaller slope which finally gets negative. The influence of the additive noise increases when we increase the value of the initial principal quantum number \( n_0 \). For each value of the initial quantum number the noise levels used were \( -35, -25, -20, \) and \( -15 \text{ dBm} \). We interpret these experimental observations in terms of destruction of the coherence properties of the quantum system due to the presence of additive noise; the system then approaches the classical diffusion process.

In the region \( n_0 > 70 \) where the phenomenon of localization is observed we performed an experimental study of the dependence of the ionization threshold on the microwave pulse length. We use \( \epsilon_{10\%} \) to denote \( \epsilon_{(10\%)} \) in the monochromatic case and \( \epsilon_{10\%} \) in the case of excitation by pure noise. In Fig. 2 \( \epsilon_{10\%} \) is plotted as a function of time, with \( n_0 = 85 \), for both coherent and stochastic excitation. From this fully logarithmic plot it is apparent that in both cases the data are in agreement with a power-law behavior \( \epsilon_{10\%} \propto \tau^{-\alpha} \) in a wide interval. Least-squares fits to the data result in \( \alpha = 0.13 \pm 0.04 \) (monochromatic case) and \( \alpha = 0.48 \pm 0.04 \) (noise case). The intervals where the fits were performed are 30 ns–10 \( \mu \)s for the coherent case and 30 ns–1 \( \mu \)s for the stochastic case. We repeated the experiments for the coherent case with different values of \( n_0 \). Again we observed a behavior according to \( \epsilon_{10\%} \propto \tau^{-\alpha} \), and the results obtained for \( \alpha \)
TABLE I. Values for $a$ for different initial quantum numbers $n_0$ (monochromatic excitation $v = 8867$ MHz). The two results given for $n_0 = 84$ have been obtained at different stages of the experiment. Their difference can be considered as a measure for the reproducibility of the determination of $a$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$n_0$</th>
<th>$a$</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>0.25 ± 0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>0.20 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>0.27 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>0.13 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>0.20 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

are collected in Table I. The measured values depend on the initial principal quantum number and range between 0.13 and 0.27.

From our experimental observation we can extract the functional form of the quantum diffusion coefficient $D_q$ for excitation by noise only. The system reaches a defined degree of ionization when the product $D_q = \tau$ equals a given constant value $K$ which defines the amount of ionization (10% in our case). We tested the results for $D_q$ according to $D_q \propto \varepsilon^\kappa$, found for the quantum kicked rotator subjected to a broadband external noise signal [8,10]. The theory predicts $\kappa = 2$. Our experimental result is $\kappa = 2.1 \pm 0.1$. It is worth noting that although the theoretical study was performed for the kicked rotator, the results are expected to be model independent [8]. Moreover, the functional form of the diffusive constant coincides with the one obtained for the classical limit of $D_q$ [8]: $D_q \propto \varepsilon^2$.

The interpretation of the experimental results obtained in the presence of a monochromatic microwave signal is less straightforward. Strictly speaking, dynamical localization theory predicts that the ionization thresholds are time independent ($D_q = 0$). In contrast with this theoretical conclusion our experimental results (Table I) show that the ionization thresholds depend on the duration of the microwave pulse. The time dependence once more obeys a power law but the experimental values of the exponent $a$ lie in the interval between 0.13 and 0.27, quite far from the value $a = 0.5$ which is typical for classical systems or for quantum systems in the presence of stochastic excitation. A first possible explanation of this experimental behavior may be the inadequacy of a one-dimensional model used to picture the ionization process. Using the analogy of dynamical localization to Anderson localization [5] in solid-state systems it is known that localization of electronic wave functions in disordered solids is restricted to the one-dimensional case. For higher-dimensional systems it is possible to find extended states [12]. A second possible explanation is that the unavoidable presence of a small thermal noise destroys the full dynamical localization of the system [13]. In fact, for a physical process similar to our experiment it has been found that the diffusion coefficient of a quantum system subjected to an intense coherent field plus a small additive noise is proportional to $D_q \propto \varepsilon^2 e^a$ [8]. Starting from this equation it follows that one has to expect for the $\varepsilon_{10\%}$ threshold fields a $\tau^{-a}$ dependence characterized by the exponent $a = 0.25$. This theoretical value of the exponent is roughly close to the values observed experimentally—with the exception of the state with $n_0 = 85$ (see Table I). It seems this state shows a higher stability with respect to microwave ionization. Similar phenomena have been observed in microwave ionization experiments with hydrogen atoms and have been interpreted as a manifestation of scars [14]. A third reason may be that coupling to the continuum may induce a slow decay of the Floquet states populated by the microwave [15].

Up to this point we focused on the interpretation of the experimental time dependence of the ionization process in the stochastic and in the monochromatic case. However, our study also shows another important experimental result: A broadband stochastic field covering the range of typical transition frequencies between neighboring atomic states is more effective than a coherent microwave field in the ionization of Rydberg atoms for equal values of the control parameters (initial principal quantum number, microwave power, and interaction time). This conclusion is manifested in Fig. 2 ($n_0 = 84$) for all the investigated time intervals. To obtain further information about this effect, an estimate of the $\varepsilon_{10\%}$ threshold field was made for several different states, with the interaction time fixed to $5 \mu s$, in the range $n_0 = 60-90$. The results of this investigation are plotted in Fig. 3. In the same figure we show for comparison the threshold fields $\varepsilon_{10\%}$ obtained with coherent excitation of frequency equal to 8867 MHz and with the same interaction time. In the investigated $n_0$ range, and for the chosen interaction time, the microwave power necessary to ionize 10% of the atoms is always
lower in the case of broadband noise than in the case of coherent signal excitation. This experimental observation shows that in a multiphoton ionization process, a pure broadband noise within the appropriate spectral range is more effective than a coherent signal. However, the question immediately arises which part of the spectrum of our broadband noise source is responsible for the observed ionization (in the absence of a coherent field) or for its enhancement (in the presence of a coherent field). It is therefore open to further experiments either to reduce the bandwidth of the noise or to select discrete frequencies or small frequency bands from the large spectral range accessible, and to study the resulting ionization efficiency. This should provide further information on the necessary properties of perturbations used to destroy localization and to enhance or even to cause ionization.

In conclusion, our experimental study shows that quantum coherent phenomena are effective in rubidium Rydberg atoms excited by monochromatic microwave fields. We also show that a weak additive noise destroys these quantum properties after a certain interaction time. In addition, our study of the time dependence proves experimentally for the first time that a quantum system subjected to broadband excitation displays a diffusive behavior. We also give experimental evidence that broadband microwave excitation can more efficiently ionize Rydberg atoms than a coherent microwave field.

One of us (R.N.M.) acknowledges financial support of a senior fellowship awarded by CNR–NATO. Useful discussions with D. Delande, S. Fishman, and J.-C. Gay are gratefully appreciated.

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