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EVIDENCE FOR SOFT MODES AT $\mathbf{q} \neq 0$ IN THE FAR-INFRARED SPECTRUM OF Rb$_2$ZnBr$_6$

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Incommensurable structures have attracted a great deal of interest during the last years$^1$. In these systems, below a transition temperature $T_1$, the atomic positions are shifted periodically, with a characteristic wavevector which is incommensurable with the underlying lattice. In most cases, this modulation becomes commensurable at a temperature $T_2 < T_1$. New types of excitations appear in this incommensurable phase, originating from spatial variations of the amplitude or the phase of the modulation wave, called the amplitude- and phason-modes$^2$. The transition to this phase is very often associated with the softening of a lattice mode with a wavevector $\mathbf{q} \neq 0$ situated within the Brillouin-zone. Obviously, this mode is optically inactive, as the softening of this lattice mode will not be seen directly by simple far-infrared techniques. It is expected from theoretical considerations$^2$, that also one of phason modes should soften at the lock-in transition temperature $T_2$. Although this mode is in principle optical active, it has not been observed directly due to its small oscillator strength$^3$.

In this paper we will show that it is possible to study these soft modes at both phase transitions in a rather indirect way. The method is based on the fact that all lattice modes are coupled with each other due to the anharmonicity of the interaction potential. Not the soft mode itself, but the effect of its softening on the other optical active modes is investigated.

The electrodynamic response of a system of damped harmonic oscillators of frequency $\omega_j$ and damping constant $\gamma_j$ is characterized by the frequency dependent dielectric function:

$$\varepsilon(\omega) = \varepsilon(\infty) + \sum_j \frac{f_j}{(\omega_j^2 - \omega^2 - i\omega\gamma_j)} ,$$  

where $f_j$ is the oscillator strength of the mode $j$. The coupling of the modes is reflected in the damping constants $\gamma_j$, which are the only entries in Eq. (1) containing information of properties at non-zero wavevectors. Using the usual perturbation theory, these damping constants are given in first order by$^4$:

$$\gamma_j = \frac{\hbar}{16\pi^2\omega_j} \sum_{i,k} \left\{ \frac{\omega_j^2 - \omega_k^2}{\omega_k^2 - \omega_i^2} \left[ n_k + n_i \right] \right\} \left[ \delta(\omega_j - \omega_k - \omega_i) - \delta(\omega_j + \omega_k + \omega_i) \right] .$$

Here, the summation includes all pairs of modes which fulfill momentum conservation. $N$ is the number of unit cells, the temperature dependent occupation number is given by $n_q = \frac{\exp(\hbar\omega_q/\hbar^2T)}{1 + \exp(\hbar\omega_q/\hbar^2T)}$ and $w_{ik}$ are the coefficients of the third order terms of the anharmonic potential.

If at a $\mathbf{q} \neq 0$ a mode $\omega_{1q}$ softens, then one gets for the temperature dependence close to the phase transition

$$\omega_{1q} = \frac{T}{T_1 - T} T^\beta$$

where $\beta$ usually equals to $0.5$. Here $T_1$ is the transition temperature. Near $T_1$, we have $\hbar\omega_q \ll kT$ and $n_q \ll n_i$, for all $i \neq q$. Therefore, the leading term in Eq. (2) will be $\propto n_q/\omega_q$ which gives in first approximation$^6$:

$$\gamma_{1q}(T) = T / (T_1 - T) .$$

The softening of the mode at $\mathbf{q}$ thus results in an increase of the damping constants $\gamma_i$ of all other modes $i \neq q$ near the phase transition. This can indirectly be observed by measuring $\gamma_i$ as a function of temperature.

As an example for a normal structural phase transition accompanied by the softening of an infrared inactive mode, in Fig. 1 a part of the far-infrared reflection spectrum of $(\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_2)_2\text{CuCl}_4$ is presented$^6$. For the experimentally clearly distinguishable resonances in-
Fig. 1a: Reflectivity $R$ of $(\text{CH}_3\text{NH}_3)_2\text{CuCl}_4$, relative to the reflectivity $R_g$ of a gold sample, as a function of frequency for several temperatures.

1b: Inverse of the normalized damping constant $\gamma(0)/\gamma(T)$ as a function of the inverse temperature $T^{-1}$ for the peaks indicated in Fig. 1a.

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We have applied this method to Rb$_2$ZnBr$_4$, known to be a modulated structure with $T_1 = 353$ K and $T_c = 201$ K. As the effect is expected to be rather small, the experimental conditions for measuring the transmission have to be controlled rather accurately. Therefore, a very stable source of monochromatic far-infrared radiation is needed. We used a harmonic generator of microwaves, which is continuously tunable over the range 2 to 25 cm$^{-1}$. A detector, a He cooled silicon bolometer was used.

In Fig. 2 the transmission at 7.81 cm$^{-1}$ of Rb$_2$ZnBr$_4$ relative to the transmission of the system without sample is plotted against inverse temperature. The figure shows a pronounced maximum at 201 K, and a very small one at 353 K at the two known transition temperatures $T_c = 201$ K and $T_1 = 353$ K. In addition, at 300 K another well defined maximum is found, indicating an extra phase transition within the incommensurable phase. In Fig. 3 more detailed measurements for temperatures close to $T_1$ are presented, using different frequencies, and all showing the linear $T^{-1}$ dependence of the transmission around $T_1$, in accordance with Eq. (10).

These results indicate that one can observe the softening of the modes at both $T_c$ and $T_1$ indirectly, which seemed to be impossible in a direct way. As the damping has already increased considerably with temperature around $T_1$, the soft mode contribution is probably relatively smaller here, leading to a smaller effect in the transmission at $T_1$. As the amplitude is expected to change only slightly in frequency at the temperature $T_1$, the $q_0$ phonon mode should soften at $T_1$. Therefore, the observed effect at $T_1$ can tentatively be ascribed to this soft $q_0$ phonon mode. The maximum at 300 K indicates a possible other phase transition within the incommensurable phase, a fact that is also suggested recently by other experiments. This could be the forming of a domain-like structure, consisting of commensurate microdomains, before the transition to the real commensurate phase at 200 K takes place.

In conclusion we have shown the possibility of indirect investigation of $q \neq 0$, infrared inactive soft modes through their contribution to the damping of the other optically active lattice modes. The experiment involves the measuring with very high accuracy of the temperature dependence of the transmission, using very stable monochromatic far-infrared radiation. In this way the optically inactive soft mode at the normal-incommensurable transition as well as the soft mode at the lock-in transition at $T_1$ could be seen in Rb$_2$ZnBr$_4$. At $T_1$, the observed effect can be ascribed to a soft phason. This gives new evidence for the existence of these excitations, characteristic for...
incommensurable structures but rather hard to observe. At 300 K an intermediate transition within the incommensurable phase has been seen, which is probably a transition to a domain-like structure.

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