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Microcrystalline silicon: strain gauge and sensor arrays on flexible substrate for the measurement of high deformations

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Abstract

This paper presents strain sensor arrays on flexible substrates able to measure local deformation induced by radii of curvature of few millimeters. Sensors use \textit{n}-type doped microcrystalline silicon (µc-Si) as piezoresistive material, directly deposited on polyimide sheets at 165°C. Sensitivity of individual sensors was investigated under tensile and compressive bending at various radii of curvature, down to 5 mm. A Transmission Line Method was used to extract the resistivity for each radius. The devices exhibited longitudinal gauge factors of -31 and longitudinal piezoresistive coefficients of $-4 \times 10^{-10}$ Pa$^{-1}$. Reliability was demonstrated with almost unchanged resistances after cycles of bending (standard deviation of 1.7 %). Strain-gauge arrays, composed of 800 resistors on a 2 cm$^2$ area, were fabricated with a spatial resolution of 500 x 500 µm$^2$. Strain mapping showed the possibility to detect local deformation on a single resistor or to detect larger objects. These strain sensor arrays can find applications when high sensitivity and high spatial resolution is required. This paper also showed that µc-Si can be a relevant semi-conductor candidate for flexible electronics.

Keywords: Microcrystalline silicon, strain gauge arrays, high spatial resolution arrays, flexible substrate

1 Introduction

Flexible electronics becomes a major research domain due to a fast growing market. Many devices on flexible substrates are under development with great possibilities in robotics [1], health monitoring [2], epidermal electronics [3], intelligent textile [4] or aeronautics [5]. Resistive-based tactile sensors are often preferred thanks to a basic working principle and have been widely reported [6, 7]. However, most present ones are limited at high deformations induced by low radius of curvature (few millimeters). This limitation is even more important when high spatial resolution is required. The purpose of this work is to develop strain sensor arrays on flexible substrate which could measure local deformations, with spatial resolution in the range of 100 x 100 to 500 x 500 µm$^2$. According to the literature, such arrays have not been previously developed.

Two main types of materials are used as strain gauges: metals and semiconductors. Other materials such as organic semi-conductors [8], graphite [9], carbon nanotubes [10] or conductive polymer composites [11] are approached in the literature but are still not matured. The gauge factor ($GF$) is typically used to quantify the sensitivity of a resistive strain sensor and is defined by Eq. (1) as the ratio of the relative change in its resistance ($\Delta R/R_0$) and the strain $\varepsilon$ applied to that sensor:

$$GF = \frac{\Delta R/R_0}{\varepsilon}$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

For metals, $GF$ is low, between 2 to 5 [12]. In addition, their low resistivity implies long wires to obtain measurable values, which is a huge limitation to reach the expected spatial resolution. For semiconductors, such
as silicon-based materials, GF exhibits much larger values thanks to the so-called piezoresistivity effect: 100 for single crystalline silicon (sc-Si), 20–40 for polycrystalline silicon (poly-Si) [13] or 20–30 for amorphous silicon (a-Si) [14]. The possibility to control their resistivity with doping is also an advantage when designing measurable resistor in limited spaces. Flexible sensor arrays based on single crystalline silicon have been reported in the literature [4, 15, 16, 17]. Silicon material can be embedded in soft polymers or reported on a flexible substrate. However, due to the mechanically brittle nature of silicon, it cannot be bent down to few millimeters. Transfer techniques exist to obtain bendable ultrathin silicon (30–50 µm thick) but suffer from several drawbacks including (i) high costs; (ii) low efficiencies; and (iii) required additional elements like adhesive at silicon/substrate interface implying possible complex behaviours. Another approach aims to overcome these limitations through the use of deposited silicon thin-films directly on plastic, with low temperature process techniques (100–250°C). Silicon films can be amorphous or polycrystalline with grain size of 10–100 nm. Nano- or micro-crystalline silicon (respectively nc-Si, μc-Si), is much more electrically stable than amorphous silicon and present the possibility to change its resistivity in a larger range. Flexible strain sensors using a-Si, μc-Si and nc-Si have been already studied [14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. Nevertheless, this work presents results for higher bending radii of curvature (5 mm) to confirm the potential of μc-Si in flexible electronics. Thus, this paper reports a large area, high sensitivity and high spatial resolution strain gauge arrays using directly deposited μc-Si film as piezoresistive material. Strain gauges are first investigated individually with compressive and tensile tests. A Transmission Line Method was used to extrapolate directly the resistivity of μc-Si films. These gauges are then integrated into high density arrays (800 sensors on a 2 cm² area, i.e. a spatial resolution of 250 µm²) and characterized with a custom acquisition system. The technology is realized on Kapton substrates with various thicknesses (25, 50, 125 µm) to show the large capabilities.

2 Microcrystalline silicon film

PECVD is a usual method to obtain as-deposited crystallized silicon films at low temperature with carrier gases such as silane (SiH\textsubscript{4}) and hydrogen (H\textsubscript{2}), preferentially with very high dilution of silane in hydrogen (less than 1%) [23]. It was shown previously using Raman spectroscopy that argon (Ar) added in the gas mixture increases the dissociation of SiH\textsubscript{4}, producing high H\textsubscript{2} atomic content and, as a consequence, higher crystalline fraction [24]. The Transverse Optic band (TO) of the Raman spectrum is located around 480 cm\textsuperscript{-1} for a-Si and at 520 cm\textsuperscript{-1} for sc-Si. Fig. 1 shows the Raman TO band obtained for 50 nm thick films deposited at 165°C by RF-PECVD using (i) 1.5 sccm of SiH\textsubscript{4} and 150 sccm of H\textsubscript{2} (1% dilution of SiH\textsubscript{4} in H\textsubscript{2}, red dash plot) and (ii) 1.5 sccm of SiH\textsubscript{4}, 75 sccm of H\textsubscript{2} and 75 sccm of Ar (1% dilution of SiH\textsubscript{4} in Ar-H\textsubscript{2} mixture, black solid plot). Obviously, the first film (i) is mainly amorphous whereas the second one (ii) is mainly crystallized with respective calculated crystalline fractions of 20 % and 60 %.

![Fig. 1. Raman TO band obtained for a 50 nm thick μc-Si films deposited without (red dash plot) and with (black solid plot) Ar in the deposition gas mixture. Amorphous contribution (480 cm\textsuperscript{-1}) is dominant in “without argon” film. Crystalline phase (520 cm\textsuperscript{-1}) is dominant in “with argon” film.](image)

To obtain n-type doped μc-Si films, arsine (AsH\textsubscript{3}) is added to the gas mixture as dopant. The electrical conductivity at ambient temperature varies in a very large range depending on the AsH\textsubscript{3} flow: from 3.10\textsuperscript{-9} S.cm\textsuperscript{-1} to 12 S.cm\textsuperscript{-1} for a 50 nm thick μc-Si film, respectively undoped and highly n-type doped. P-type doped μc-Si films were also deposited by adding diborane (B\textsubscript{2}H\textsubscript{6}) to the gas mixture as dopant. The minimum conductivity obtained with the highest doping was only 1 S.cm\textsuperscript{-1}. According to the spatial resolution aimed, the resistor dimensions required can be an area of 100 x 100 µm\textsuperscript{2}. In this work, n-type doped μc-Si is used with a thickness in the range of 50–100 nm to obtain resistances from 10 to 50 kΩ, compatible to our acquisition system.
3 Strain gauges

3.1 Design and fabrication process

The structure is based on a Transmission Line Method (TLM). The aim is to measure the resistivity of a semiconductor film and the contact resistance $R_C$ at the semi-conductor/metal contact interface. Indeed, considering $R_T$ as the total measured resistance, $R_T = \rho L/(eW) + 2R_C + R_{\text{routing}}$ where $\rho$ is the resistivity of the semiconductor ($\mu\text{-Si}$), $L$, $W$ and $e$ are respectively length, width and thickness of the resistor. The routing resistance $R_{\text{routing}}$, made of aluminum (Al), can be neglected compared the semi-conductor resistance. Then, if contacts are ohmic, the fit of $R_T$ versus $L$ should be linear with a slope proportional to the resistivity $\rho$. The contact resistance $R_C$ is also determined from the intercept of linear fit with the $R_T$-axis.

In our case, the purpose is to measure the resistivity for several radii of curvature to quantify the sensitivity of the $\mu\text{-Si}$ film as a strain sensor. As stated previously, using the general equation for a resistance $R = \rho L/(eW)$ one is then able to obtain $\Delta R/R = \Delta \rho/\rho + \Delta L/L(1+2\nu)$, where $\nu$ is the Poisson’s ratio of the resistor material. The second term $\Delta L/L(1+2\nu)$ denotes the geometrical effect during bending. The first term $\Delta \rho/\rho$ is the relative resistivity variation and denotes the piezoresistive effect. For a material, such as polycrystalline silicon, it is defined as $\Delta \rho/\rho = \pi_l \sigma_l + \pi_t \sigma_t$, where $\pi_l$, $\pi_t$ are the longitudinal and transversal piezoresistive coefficients of poly-Si respectively and $\sigma_l$, $\sigma_t$ are the longitudinal and transversal applied stresses respectively. Thus, by extracting directly the resistivity $\rho$ for each radius and study as well $\Delta \rho/\rho$, the piezoresistive coefficients can be deduced. In this study, we focus on the longitudinal sensitivity.

The fabrication process begins with a cleaning step of a 5 x 5 cm² large and 50 µm thick polyimide (PI) substrate using acetone, alcohol and deionized water. The sheet is then coated on one side with a 50 nm thick silicon nitride passivation layer (SiNx) deposited by RF-PECVD at 150°C using a SiH₄/NH₃ mixture. The active layer, a 100 nm thick $n$-type arsenic doped $\mu\text{-Si}$ film, is deposited following the conditions described in paragraph 2 and islands-like structures are patterned by Reactive Ion Etching (RIE) using SF₆ plasma. A 100 nm thick aluminum layer (Al) is deposited by thermal evaporation and patterned by wet etching to form electrodes. The sample is finally annealed in N₂ atmosphere at 180°C for 2h.

Fig. 2 provides an optical image of a final sample and a schematic illustration of a TLM structure.

![Fig. 2. (a) Optical image of a sample, (b) Schematic illustration of a final TLM structure. Each TLM pattern is composed of 6 resistors, with different lengths $L$ (5, 10, 20, 40, 80 and 160 µm). 4 widths $W$ are studied (1000, 500, 250 and 125 µm), which results in 24 distinct resistors.](image)

3.2 Bending set-up and test procedure

In order to quantify the piezoresistive effect, strain gauges are measured with different radii of curvature $r$. Several methods are commonly used and can be separated in 2 categories: dynamic and static bending tests. Dynamic measurements may provide more informative results but require sophisticated instruments such as custom ones or 4-point bending tests [20]. Moreover, the classical 4-point method does not allow high bending. Static tools are easier to handle but measurements can be difficult for thin plastic substrates and low radii of curvature ($r \leq 5$ mm). In our case, a 2-wire static I-V method is used.

For each radius, 4 TLM structures are measured. These 4 structures correspond to one column on the sample (see Fig. 2) and are placed on the same bending axis. Fig. 3 shows the homemade tools used to apply tensile and
compressive stresses: 5 tensile (2.5, 2, 1.5, 1, 0.5 cm) and 4 compressive radii of curvature (2.5, 2, 1.5, 1 cm) were used. 

I-V measurements are performed by an Agilent B1500A at room temperature, with applied voltage between ±1 V. The procedure consists in a first measurement without bending (flat substrate) to obtain the initial values. The sample is then fixed onto the tensile bending tools from the lowest curvature (highest radius) to the highest curvature (lowest radius). Between each bending, resistors are reflattened and measured to evaluate reliability. The same procedure is made for compressive tests. Since the study focus on the longitudinal sensitivity, resistors are placed so that the current flow in the channel is in the same direction of the curvature.

![Set-up used for I-V measurements during bending: (a) and (b) tensile tests, (c) compressive tests.](image)

**Fig. 3.** Set-up used for I-V measurements during bending: (a) and (b) tensile tests, (c) compressive tests.

### 3.3 Strain Calculation

For each radius of curvature, the strain $\varepsilon$ applied to the structure is calculated using a bi-layer simplified model of the real tri-layer structure with respect to their Young modulus $Y$ and thickness values [25], Fig. 4. In our case, the material properties are presented in Table 1. This model takes into account the substrate and the stiffest layer, which mainly define the mechanical behavior of the device. Electrodes are not represented since we focus on the resistor, between the 2 contacts. The bi-layer model is thus constituted by the PI substrate and the SiNx layer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer</th>
<th>PI</th>
<th>SiNx</th>
<th>µc-Si</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thickness (µm)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Y$ (GPa)</td>
<td>2.5 [26]</td>
<td>183 [25]</td>
<td>80 [27]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Material properties used in this paper.*
The longitudinal strain $\varepsilon_{\text{surface}}$ on the surface of the layer is given by the equation derived from [25]:

$$
\varepsilon_{\text{surface}} = \left( \frac{1}{r} - \frac{1}{r_0} \right) \left( \frac{d_f + d_s}{2} \right) \left[ 1 + 2\eta + \chi \eta \right] \left[ 1 + \chi \right]^{-1} \tag{2}
$$

where $r$ and $r_0$ are the applied and initial radii of curvature respectively, $d_s$ and $d_f$ are substrate and layer thicknesses respectively, $\chi$ and $\eta$ are defined by $\chi = Y_f/Y_s$ and $\eta = d_f/d_s$, where $Y_s$ and $Y_f$ are substrate and layer Young modulii respectively. The plus (or minus) signs depends on applied bending opposite to (or with) the built-in curvature. After the fabrication process, the samples have a low tensile built-in curvature $r_0$, of ~18 cm. This initial curvature is due to the thermal steps in the fabrication procedure. Polymeric substrates have indeed coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) larger than those of inorganic materials. Consequently, residual strains (also called as thermal mismatch) can appear in the system, causing the sample to distort into a cylindrical shape. This behaviour has already been reported and is still investigated due to the wide variety of materials in flexible electronics [28], [29]. In our case, this low curvature is not a critical issue when handling the substrate. However, during flat position measurements, the latter is kept flat with adhesive tapes. This forced position implies a slight compressive strain in the film and the real no-strain position $\Delta p/\rho(c=0) = 0$ shifts toward compressive direction (see Fig. 7).

### 3.4 Results

#### 3.4.1 TLM measurements

Fig. 5 shows the resistances measured for the 4 TLM structures presented on Fig. 2. Resistivity and contact resistance are extracted from the fits for each structure and values summarized in Table 2. Correlation coefficient of the linear fits are given in the figure and show the excellent linearity of the data. The mean resistivity of the $\mu$-Si film is $\rho = 0.135 \pm 0.012 \, \Omega \cdot \text{cm}$, which is the value targeted with the deposition conditions. The resistivity variation can be explained by two main reasons: (i) the substrate can be slightly curved during the deposition of the $\mu$-Si film since the substrate is positioned manually and not reported on a rigid carrier; (ii) a high surface roughness on the Kapton substrate for large area ($\approx 100 \times 100 \, \mu\text{m}^2$) due to defaults on the surface. The contact resistance $R_c$, as determined from the intercept of linear fit, is negligible compared with the semi-conductor resistances. It results in a good ohmic contact between aluminium and $\mu$-Si.

![Fig. 5. Resistance $R_T$ measured as function of length $L$. Results are presented for 4 widths $W$. Correlation coefficients are named $C_{corr}$ to avoid any misunderstood.](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$W$ (µm)</th>
<th>125</th>
<th>250</th>
<th>500</th>
<th>1000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$ (Ω·cm)</td>
<td>0.149</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>0.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c$ (Ω)</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.2 Reflattened reliability

For sensing applications, the ability to return to the initial value is essential. Thereby, we measured the resistances after every bending to observe possible changes after several cycles of bending to various radii. **Fig. 6** shows example of resistances measured initially and after 8 following bending for one TLM structure (width $W = 1000 \ \mu\text{m}$). Values are nearly the same even after a maximum bending of 5 mm and the mean standard deviation is 1.7 %. Same behaviours were observed for the 3 other TLM structures and no failure was observed for the 24 resistors (neither delamination nor cracks). Resistivity of the 4 structures also stays nearly unchanged, which can be seen in **Table 3** showing the average value after every bending with very small standard deviations.

**Table 3.** Average resistivity $\rho$ measured after every bending for the 4 TLM structures, with their respective standard deviation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$W$ (µm)</th>
<th>125</th>
<th>250</th>
<th>500</th>
<th>1000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$ (Ω cm)</td>
<td>0.153 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.131 ± 0.002</td>
<td>0.143 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.125 ± 0.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.3 Gauge Factor

As explain previously, the strain is calculated using **Eq. (2)**. **Fig. 7** shows the relative resistivity variation $\Delta \rho/\rho$ as a function of the longitudinal strain $\varepsilon_{\text{reflatt}}$. The longitudinal piezoresistive coefficient $\pi_L$ and the gauge factor $GF$, defined previously, can be extracted from the linear fits. Each point is the mean value for the 4 widths $W$. The small standard deviations associated suggest no relevant influence of the resistivity on the sensitivity. This is important information in order to integrate those sensors in large area arrays. The behaviour appears to be different for tensile and compressive stresses resulting in 2 different gauge factors: $GF_{\text{Tens}} \sim -28$ and $GF_{\text{Comp}} \sim -37.5$ respectively (variation of 30 %). This difference was already observed for $n$-type $\mu$-c-Si in [21], where authors suggested the apparition of micro-cracks that get more open (tensile) or closed (compressive). However, bending tests have been realized here in two orders: tensile (compressive) tests first followed by compressive (tensile) tests and in both case the same phenomenon appears. On the other hand, if tensile and compressive data are considered together, we can conclude to an average $GF \sim -31$. In both case, these $GF$ values are typical for $n$-type $\mu$-c-Si at low temperature obtained on various plastics and various thicknesses [19, 20, 21] or on Si-wafer [22]. It is slightly lower than sc-Si resistors bonded on PI substrate (-43) [15] but here, the present results are given for lower radius of curvature down to 5 mm, instead of 12 mm. No failure among the 24 resistors was observed, even down to $r = 5 \ \text{mm}$ corresponding to an applied strain of $\varepsilon = 0.47 \ %$. 

---

**Table 2.** Electrical properties extracted from **Fig. 3**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Flattened after tension</th>
<th>Flattened after compression</th>
<th>$\pi_L$</th>
<th>$\varepsilon_{\text{reflatt}}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R (kΩ)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Fig. 6.** Electrical stability of the sample when reflattened for $W = 1000 \ \mu\text{m}$: resistances $R_T$ measured initially for a flat substrate (1) and after each bending (2 to 9).
In terms of piezoresistance, our μc-Si film presents an average longitudinal piezoresistive coefficient of \(-4.10^{10}\) Pa\(^{-1}\). Such value is in the same order of those obtained for poly-Si deposited at high temperature and nc-Si deposited at the same range of temperature [13, 27].

![Fig. 7. Relative resistivity Variation \(\Delta \rho/\rho\) vs. applied strain \(\varepsilon\) (tensile strains, red data and negative strains, blue data). \(C_{corr}\) represent the correlation coefficient of the fits.]

4 Application: strain gauge arrays

Similar μc-Si strain gauges have been integrated in 800 element arrays (40 rows, 20 columns) in a 2 cm\(^2\) area with a spatial resolution of 500 x 500 μm\(^2\) (i.e. a pitch of 500 μm), Fig 8. The aim is to use the flexible and stretchable ability of a plastic substrate associated with a piezoresistive material to localise and measure any deformation applied on the active area. The same design was processed on 3 Kapton substrates using different thicknesses commercially available: 25, 50 and 125 μm. The fabrication process is slightly different from the previous TLM structure: a 200 nm thick SiN passivation layer instead of 50 nm. Aluminum is used for electrodes and silicon dioxide (SiO\(_2\)) as dielectric material between the 2 metal layers (row and column layers).

![Fig. 8. Photography of a strain gauges array on a 25 μm Kapton substrate (800 elements). The 60 Inputs/Outputs are on the edge of the substrate to be connected with Zero Insertion Force connector (ZIF).]

4.1 Multiplexing technology

Most common techniques to measure resistance changes are based either on 4-wire method or Wheatstone Bridges. However, these techniques are not suitable for high density sensor arrays and for embedded systems which require limited spaces for electrode pads. For a passive matrix, without switching elements, a 2-wire technique associated with an external addressing system is preferred. Several scanning methods are reviewed in [30]. Here, the measurement is made one-by-one by applying an input voltage \(V_{IN}\) between one column and one
row to address a sensor pixel. The other rows and columns are connected to a zero voltage so the current only
goes through the desired resistor. Current is then converted into voltage using a typical current-voltage converter
with a 0-10 V output. Finally, the signal is converted to digital by a 10 bits analog-digital converter (ADC). Fig.
9 (a) shows a schematic of the readout circuit and Fig. 9 (b) shows a block diagram of the acquisition system.
The output voltage \( V_{OUT} \) of the equivalent circuit is defined by Eq. (3), where \( R_I \) is a variable resistor and \( R_{µc-Si} \)
the µc-Si resistance of the measured sensor.

\[
V_{OUT} = \frac{R_I}{R_{µc-Si}} V_{IN}
\]  

(3)

A low-power Atmel 8-bit AVR RISC-based microcontroller drives the communication from the computer to the
custom data acquisition hardware and also addresses the matrix. A strain measurement consists in a first scan of
the array without stress and a second scan under stress. The relative resistance variation \( \frac{R}{R} \) of every sensor is
then calculated and a pressure mapping can be displayed.

![Readout circuit schematic and block diagram of the data acquisition method](image)

**Fig. 9.** (a) Readout circuit schematic. Here, only a 3 x 3 example array is presented and \( R_{11} \) is measured, (b)
Block diagram of the data acquisition method.

### 4.2 Pressure localisation

Various tests have been realized to observe the devices response under deformation. Static pressures were
applied using a lever-system with additional weights sliding on the lever, shown in Fig. 10. The tip of the probe
is spherical with a diameter of ~2.4 mm and a contact surface of ~1 mm. A soft paper is placed under the device
to allow its deformation. When the device is directly placed on a rigid platform such as steel or glass, no
significant variations appear because the substrate alone is too stiff. In practical applications, a soft material like
polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) with a very low Young modulus (1 MPa) could be used.

Two examples of \( \frac{AR}{R} \) mapping are presented in Fig. 11, for a 50 µm thick substrate. Fig. 11 (a) shows a 2D
mapping between two consecutives scanning without pressure: resistances remain unchanged. The mean absolute resistance variation is \( |\frac{AR}{R}| = 0.27 \% \), which proves a good stability. Fig. 11 (b) shows a 2D mapping
for an applied static pressure of ~ 1.9 N/mm² (190 g). In both case, 800 resistors are measured. The relative
variation \( \frac{AR}{R} \) increases on the stressed sensor, corresponding to a compression since the pressure is applied on
the front face. Consequently, this sensor array is able to detect a pressure (or a deformation) on a single sensor.
The spatial resolution used here, 500 x 500 µm², is arbitrary and can be modified with respect to the applications
aimed such as 200 x 200 µm², 100 x 100 µm² and so on.
Fig. 10. Device Under Test (DUT) with custom pressure lever-system. The pressure is calculated considering a 1 mm² contact surface and additional weights sliding on the lever (8, 108, 170, 200 g).

Fig. 11. 2D mapping of $\frac{AR}{R}$ obtained for a 50 µm thick substrate: (a) no pressure, (b) applied pressure (1.9 N/mm²). A Matlab® interpolation algorithm is used.

Fig. 12 summarizes the measurements made with various pressures on the 3 different substrate thicknesses (25, 50, 125 µm). The maximum of $\frac{AR}{R}$ is taken into account. Each value is the average of 3 maximum $\frac{AR}{R}$ values. The data disparity can be explained by several points, mainly related to the custom lever-system: (i) the inhomogeneous pressure on the contact surface since the tip is spherical; (ii) due to the small size and the high spatial resolution, it is difficult to define exactly where the pressure is applied: on a sensor, between 2 sensors or in the center of 4 sensors; (iii) the center of mass may vary between different tests, so the force direction varies in the same manner. Enhanced results would require a specific force instrument with a (X, Y) movable chuck and a micrometer placement resolution, such as an indenter. We can notice that thinnest substrate permits to detect and measure lowest pressure. This result is consistent since a thin substrate (25 µm thick) is easily deformable, resulting in a more sensitive sensor to low pressure. The response reaches a maximum easier to observe for the 25 µm thick substrate than the two other thicknesses. This limitation is due to the local deformation, which is maximal. The high values can be explained by the small radius of the tip. Additional effects come from the process design.
Fig. 12. $\Delta R/R$ peaks measured as a function of various applied pressures for 3 substrate thicknesses (25, 50, 125 µm).

The detection of larger objects was also performed using a cylinder with a diameter of ~1.5 mm. Fig. 13 shows the cylinder applied on the middle (Fig. 13 (a)) or on the edge (Fig. 13 (b)) of the matrix and the response shows a good spatial localization. The inhomogeneous $\Delta R/R$ response observed is due to the surface roughness of the cylinder resulting in a deformation different from one point to another. This highlights the possibility to detect defects on the surface of materials with any shapes.

Fig. 13. Localisation of a cylinder with a diameter of ~1.5 mm and the corresponding $\Delta R/R$ mapping responses: (a) in the middle of the matrix, (b) on the side of the matrix.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented flexible strain sensor arrays on plastic using $n$-type doped microcrystalline silicon as piezoresistive element. The fabrication process is made at low temperature (<200°C) and fit with various kind of plastics. Mechanical and electrical measurements showed good stability and high sensitivity. Indeed, microcrystalline silicon showed a longitudinal gauge factor of -31 and a longitudinal piezoresistive coefficient of $-4 \times 10^{-10}$ Pa$^{-1}$. Characterizations were made under tensile and compressive bending until radii of curvature down to 5 mm and no failure was observed. Sensor arrays with a high spatial resolution (500 x 500 µm$^2$) have been processed on various substrate thicknesses (25, 50, 125 µm) and showed excellent localisation of applied single pressure. Such matrix could be used for any applications demanding requirements in strain mapping on non-plane surface and limited spaces. This paper also showed that microcrystalline silicon can be a relevant semi-conductor for flexible electronic devices, thanks to the mature silicon technologies.
Acknowledgement

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Yannick Kervran received his BS degree in Materials Science in 2009 at the University of Rennes 1 and his MS degree in Applied Science with a specialization on Nanotechnology Engineering in 2011, from a collaboration between the Ecole Centrale Paris and the University of Paris-Sud 11. He is currently pursuing the PhD degree in Electrical Engineering at the University of Rennes 1. His research interests focus on medical devices and flexible electronics, which include materials, process strategies and packaging technologies.