

3. Theory

3.1 Interference

Light is an electromagnetic wave that is associated with electric and magnetic fields. When two or more light waves overlap, the total light wave at any point and at any instant is governed by the law of superposition. As a result, the resultant electric or magnetic field at any point and at any instant is the addition of the instantaneous electric or magnetic fields produced at the point by the individual light waves.

If the individual light waves have phases that bear no fixed relationship to each other over time, then the strength of the added electric or magnetic field at a point would vary randomly over time. Such strength, if averaged over time, would become more or less identical at all points on an observation screen. Under such circumstances, the screen would be more or less uniformly illuminated and an interference pattern would not be seen on the screen. Sources whose output waves bear no fixed phase relationship to each other over time are called incoherent sources.

By contrast, coherent sources are those whose output waves maintain a constant phase relation to each other over time. Usually, these light waves come from the same source so that they bear some degree of frequency and phase correlation between them. When the light waves from two coherent sources arrive at a point in phase, the field of the resultant wave is the sum of those of the individual waves; thus the individual waves reinforce each other, known as constructive interference. When the two coherent waves arrive at another point out of phase, the field of the resultant wave is the difference of those of the individual waves; hence the individual waves undermine each other, named as destructive interference. Thus, an interference phenomenon is observed only when the sources are coherent.

Light wave interference from two sources was first demonstrated by Thomas Young in 1801. Young designed an apparatus to allow a plane light wave to fall on two closely spaced parallel slits. These slits serve as a pair of coherent light sources because waves emerging from them originate from the same wave front and therefore maintain a fixed phase relationship. The light from these two slits produces a visible pattern of bright and dark parallel bands called fringes on a viewing screen. Young's experiment obtained convincing evidence for the wave nature of light.

3.2 Michelson Interferometer

An important instrument involving wave interference is the Michelson interferometer invented by A. A. Michelson in 1881 using a similar principle. Originally, the device helped to provide one of the key experimental foundations of the theory of relativity. More recently, Michelson interferometers have been used to measure wavelengths or other lengths with great precision.

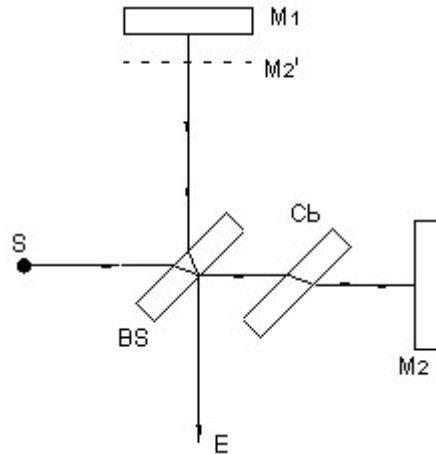


Figure 1 Diagram of Michelson interferometer

Figure 1 shows a schematic Michelson interferometer. A ray of light from a monochromatic source **S** is split equally into two rays by a beam-splitter **BS**, which is inclined at 45° to the incident light beam. One beam is reflected by **BS** vertically upward toward a fixed mirror **M₁**, the second ray is transmitted horizontally through **BS** toward a movable mirror **M₂**. After reflecting from **M₁** and **M₂**, the two rays eventually recombine at **BS** to produce an interference pattern, which can be viewed by an observer's eye **E**. The purpose of using a compensator plate **CP** here is to ensure that the two rays pass through the same thickness of glass, as **CP** is cut from the same piece of glass as **BS** so that their thicknesses are identical.

The interference condition for the two rays is determined by their path differences. In general, the interference pattern is a target pattern of bright and dark circular fringes. As **M₂** is moved, the fringe pattern collapses or expands, depending upon the moving direction of **M₂**. In either case, the fringe pattern shifts by one-half fringe each time **M₂** is moved a distance that is equal to a quarter of the wavelength of light. As a result, the wavelength of light can be measured by counting the number of fringe shifts for a given displacement of **M₂**. On the other hand, if the wavelength of light is known, mirror displacement can be measured precisely, within a fraction of the wavelength of light using the same procedure.