Direct frequency comb measurements of absolute optical frequencies and population transfer dynamics

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A phase-stabilized femtosecond laser comb is directly used for high-resolution spectroscopy and absolute optical frequency measurements of one- and two-photon transitions in laser-cooled $^{87}$Rb atoms. Absolute atomic transition frequencies, such as the $5S_{1/2} F=2 \rightarrow 7S_{1/2} F'=2$ two-photon resonance measured at $788\,794\,768\,921(44)$ kHz, are determined without a priori knowledge about their values. Detailed dynamics of population transfer driven by a sequence of pulses are uncovered and taken into account for the measurement of the 5P states via resonantly enhanced two-photon transitions.

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Phase-stabilized optical frequency combs based on mode-locked femtosecond lasers have formed a powerful connection between the fields of precision measurement and ultrafast science. Numerous applications have ensued, including measurements of absolute optical frequencies and the development of optical atomic clocks. Recent work has demonstrated that optical frequency combs are a highly efficient tool for precise studies of atomic structure. Direct frequency comb spectroscopy (DFCS) has been performed on the 5S-5D two-photon transitions in Rb, permitting high-resolution spectroscopy of all atomic transitions covered by the comb bandwidth. Additionally, this approach provides significant advantages for precise studies of time domain dynamics, coherent accumulation and interference, and quantum control. An extension of frequency comb metrology to the deep-ultraviolet spectral region (where continuous wave lasers are not readily available) was recently achieved by using the 4th harmonic of a femtosecond laser.

In this work, we apply DFCS to determine absolute atomic transition frequencies anywhere within the comb bandwidth, for one- and two-photon processes. By measuring the previously unknown absolute frequency of the 5S-7S two-photon transitions in $^{87}$Rb, we show that prior knowledge of atomic transition frequencies is not essential for this technique to work, and indicate that it can be applied in a broad context. When resonant enhancement is enabled by a comb component tuned near an intermediate 5P state, we observe two-photon transitions occurring between initial and final states that differ by one unit of the total angular momentum ($\Delta F = \pm 1$), which are absent for far-detuned intermediate states. This capability of accessing adjacent excited hyperfine levels from the same ground state allows for direct measurements of hyperfine splittings. Additionally, we demonstrate that DFCS can be equally well applied to measuring single-photon transitions and have chosen the 5S-5P transitions in $^{87}$Rb for such a demonstration. The measurement of 5P states has also been carried out indirectly via the 5S-5D two-photon transitions by studying their resonant enhancement when comb components are scanned through the intermediate 5P states. We compare the 5P measurements obtained via one-photon and two-photon DFCS and clearly demonstrate the importance of population transfer in working with multilevel systems probed by multiple comb components.

The spectrum of a mode-locked femtosecond laser has a set of discrete optical frequencies that are described by the simple relation $\nu_N = N f_r + f_0$, where $N$ is a large integer on the order of $10^6$. The lines are spaced by $f_r$, the pulse repetition rate, and have a common offset $f_0$, the carrier-envelope offset frequency. For spectroscopic studies with a femtosecond laser, both parameters $f_r$ and $f_0$ are precisely controlled and stabilized to low-noise optical or radio frequency oscillators. In the current experiment, the output of a 20-fs, 100-MHz repetition rate Ti:Sapphire laser with a full width at half maximum of $\sim 55$ nm is used to directly interrogate a sample of laser-cooled $^{87}$Rb atoms. For the two-photon case, we study the transitions from the ground 5S$_{1/2}$ state to the excited 7S$_{1/2}$ state, as shown in Fig. 1(a). The two independent parameters $f_r$ and $f_0$ provide freedom in choosing an appropriate frequency comb for control of resonant signal enhancement via the intermediate 5P$_{1/2}$ and 5P$_{3/2}$ states. The relevant lifetimes are 88 ns for the 7S states and 27 ns for the 5P states. The excited state population is determined from the 7S-6P-5S radiative cascade: the 7S atoms decay to the 6P state and then down to the ground state, emitting photons at 420 nm. These blue photons are detected with a photomultiplier tube (PMT) centered at 420 nm and are counted and subsequently time-binned with a multi-channel photon counter. The typical loading cycle used for the magneto-optical trap (MOT) is 100 Hz and the sequence of the experiment is as follows [Fig. 1(b)]: the atoms are loaded in the MOT for 7.8 ms, then the quadrupole magnetic field for the trap is switched off, the atoms are cooled with polarization gradient (PGC) for 2 ms, then all the MOT beams are extinguished, the femtosecond comb beam is switched on for 200 µs using a Pockels cell (8-ns rise time), and finally, the 420 nm fluorescence is detected.
For the one-photon studies we have investigated both the $D_1$ and $D_2$ transitions in $^{87}$Rb, namely transitions from the ground state to the $5P_{1/2}$ excited state at 795 nm and to the $5P_{3/2}$ state at 780 nm [Fig. 1(a)]. We directly detect the fluorescence from the two $5P$ states with a near-infrared PMT coupled with a 3-nm bandwidth interference filter centered at the appropriate wavelength for the transition. Background counts are further minimized by spatial filtering and photon collection during the probe laser-on period is disabled by switching off the PMT. As can be seen in the one-photon timing diagram of Fig. 1(b), during the 200 µs probe window, we have a sequence of short cycles with the probe laser on (200 ns) followed by the PMT on (400 ns) to detect photons from the fast-decaying $5P$ states. A 2.6 µs interval (PMT switch-off time) is required before initiating the next laser cycle. Both the two-photon and the single-photon signals are averaged over hundreds of 10 ms experiment cycles.

To null the stray magnetic fields, we apply bias-coil compensation in three orthogonal directions and make use of the two-photon signal itself: Zeeman-shifted spectra are obtained with right and left circularly polarized femtosecond comb light along each direction and the zero-frequency shift point is determined within ± 20 kHz. After nulling the residual B field, there remain two dominant sources of systematic frequency shifts, both associated with the femtosecond laser. The first is the radiation pressure of the probe laser on the atoms and the second is the AC Stark shift. For the present two-photon experiment, the line-center values are extrapolated to zero interrogation time to suppress shifts associated with photon-momentum transfer and the transitions are probed on optimal resonance (i.e., zero detuning for both the intermediate state and the final state) to minimize the AC Stark shifts.

A theoretical model describing the interaction of the femtosecond comb with atoms accounts for detailed dynamics of population transfer among the atomic states involved in transitions within the comb bandwidth. The density matrix for the state of the atomic system is calculated starting with the Liouville equation, with radiative relaxation included via phenomenological decay terms. Impulsive optical excitation followed by free evolution and decay is used to model the interaction with each pulse in the train. The density matrix equations are solved to a fourth order perturbative expansion in the electric field and an iterative numerical scheme is employed to obtain the state of the atomic system after an arbitrary number of pulses. This model is applied to accurately predict the coherent population accumulation in the relatively long-lived 5P states, followed by incoherent optical pumping. Especially important for the indirect $5P$ measurements is the incoherent optical pumping to the ground state hyperfine levels, which depends critically on the $5P$ state detunings and will be discussed in detail below.

We begin by discussing the $5S-7S$ two-photon frequency measurements. Shown in Fig. 2(a) is a typical $5S_{1/2} F''=2$ Lorentzian lineshape, generated by stepping the offset frequency $f_0$ for a fixed value of the repetition rate $f_r$ and recording the subsequent blue fluorescence corresponding to the coherently accumulated $7S$ population. For each data point, to obtain a better signal-to-noise ratio, the 80 ns-binned counts arising from the fluorescence are integrated over 2.4 µs. Alternatively, this lineshape is retrieved by sweeping $f_r$ with $f_0$ fixed at some convenient value. In general, sweeping $f_r$ has the advantage of yielding all the transitions within the laser bandwidth in only a ~26 Hz scan. This is due to the fact that the ratio of one-photon optical transition frequencies (participating in stepwise two-photon transitions) to $f_r$ is ~4×10$^6$, so that for a change in $f_r$ of ~26 Hz the resonant enhancement is repeated by the next neighboring comb component. Once the lineshape has been acquired,
what remains is to identify the correct mode number $N$ associated with each transition. If the optical frequency is already known to within $f_r/2$, this is a straightforward task. For the case of the 5S-7S two-photon transitions, where the resonance frequencies are not known a priori ($\nu_{opt} = (N_1 + N_2)f_r + 2f_0$), we scan the resonances for two different values of $f_r$ and unambiguously deduce the sum of the two associated integers $(N_1 + N_2)$.

In our case, the two repetition rates used are separated by 600 kHz to eliminate possible uncertainties arising from estimations of the $f_0$ value corresponding to the peak of the resonance.

After identifying the comb numbers associated with the transition and reducing the systematic error arising from AC Stark shift, the remaining error from radiation pressure is suppressed by extrapolating to zero interrogation time, as shown in Fig. 2(b). We determine for the $5S_{1/2} F=2 \rightarrow 7S_{1/2} F'=2$ and the $5S_{1/2} F=1 \rightarrow 7S_{1/2} F'=1$ two-photon transitions in $^{87}\text{Rb}$ the absolute optical frequencies of 788,794,768,921(44) kHz and 788,800,964,199 (122) kHz, respectively. The excited state hyperfine interval of 639,404 (130) kHz agrees very well with a previous differential measurement performed with a picosecond pulsed laser [18]. The transition spectra reported in [14], as well as a CW-based scan [15], indicated that the $F=2 \rightarrow F''=2$ and the $F=1 \rightarrow F''=1$, i.e., $\Delta F=0$ transitions, were the only allowed 5S-7S transitions in $^{87}\text{Rb}$. However, we observe additional lines, as the resonant intermediate 5P state also enables the $F=2 \rightarrow F''=1$ and $F=1 \rightarrow F''=2$, i.e., $\Delta F=\pm1$, two-photon transitions. Similar $\Delta F=\pm1$ S-S transitions have been previously observed in Na in a two-step excitation experiment employing two tunable CW dye lasers, which enabled a direct measurement of the excited state hyperfine splitting [18].

DFCS also works well for absolute frequency measurements of single-photon transitions. DFCS results on the 5P state energy levels are obtained in one-photon and two-photon measurements and compared. The one-photon DFCS employs radiative detection directly from the 5P states (Fig. 3(a) left panel), while the two-photon DFCS studies the 5P states indirectly, via resonant enhancement of the 5S-5D two-photon transitions as a function of the detuning from the intermediate state. (d) Theoretical plot of the time evolution of the ground state populations for two (symmetric) detuning values in (c), showing that (i) most of the atoms remain in the initial F=2 ground level for this closed two-photon transition and (ii) the ground state populations are largely insensitive to the sign of the detuning.

Next, we employ DFCS to study another single-photon transition in the $D_1$ manifold, $5S_{1/2} F=2 \rightarrow 5P_{3/2} F'=2$, as shown in Fig. 3(d). Again, $f_0$ is scanned while $f_r$ is stabilized to a convenient value. The absolute optical frequency for this transition is determined to be 377,105,206,563 (184) kHz, in agreement with a previous wavelength-based measurement [18]. For the corresponding two-photon DFCS experiment we map the $5S_{1/2} F=2$
FIG. 4: (Color online) (a) Lineshape of the 5S$_{1/2}$ F=2 \(\rightarrow\) 5P$_{1/2}$ F'=2 transition obtained from a scan of \(f_0\) for a fixed value of \(f_r\), by one-photon DFCS. (b) Raw counts for the same lineshape as in (a) by two-photon DFCS, along with a visual guide for the data. (c) Theoretical plot of the time evolution of the ground state populations for two (symmetric) detuning values in (b) showing a significant difference in the evolution of the ground state populations for two (symmetric) pairs of ground state population due to optical pumping caused by varying detunings from the other 5P states. (d) Normalized lineshape corresponding to the raw data in (b), obtained by using results from the theory simulation in (c) accounting for optical pumping effects.

\[5P_{1/2} \rightarrow 5D_{3/2} F''=3\] two-photon transition in the same manner employed for Fig. 4(c). Figure 4(b) shows the raw data yielded by these \((f_r, f_0)\) pair selections, along with a visual guide for the data. The apparent linewidth is significantly broader than that associated with the 5P state. Unlike the previous two-photon DFCS measurement reported in Fig. 3, the pairs of \(f_r\) and \(f_0\) used to obtain each point in Fig. 4(b) lead to substantially different detunings of the other 5P states and subsequently, varying optical pumping to the F=1 ground state. Indeed, the theory model applied to the actual experiment conditions predicts significantly different ground state population transfer dynamics. As shown in Fig. 4(c), the asymptotic values of the F=2 ground-state population are not the same for symmetric detunings from the intermediate state. Figure 4(d) presents the Lorentzian lineshape resulting from the normalization of the raw data shown in Fig. 4(b) with respect to the theoretical value of \((1 - \rho_{F=1})\), where \(\rho_{F=1}\) is the fractional ground state population in F=1, as shown in Fig. 4(c). After implementing this normalization, the optical frequency for the transition measured by the two-photon DFCS is 377 105 206 939 (179) kHz, within the error bars of the corresponding one-photon DFCS result. We note that for all measurements reported in the paper, the statistical errors (one standard deviation of the mean) associated with 5P$_{3/2}$ are significantly smaller than those associated with 5P$_{1/2}$. This is due to the stronger transition strength and less severe optical pumping effects for 5P$_{3/2}$ F=3 (part of a closed transition), leading to larger signal-to-noise ratios.

In conclusion, a phase-stabilized femtosecond comb has been used as an effective tool to perform direct spectroscopy of one- and two-photon transitions in cold $^{87}$Rb atoms. We have demonstrated that DFCS can be successfully applied to one-photon studies, by measuring 5S$_{1/2}$ \(\rightarrow\) 5P$_{1/2,3/2}$ transitions both directly and indirectly, via their resonant enhancement of the 5S-5D two-photon transitions. Additionally, we have shown the importance of including the dynamic population changes arising from pulse-accumulated population transfer in this indirect one-photon measurement. Finally, we have demonstrated that by using DFCS, the absolute value of the 5S$_{1/2}$ \(\rightarrow\) 7S$_{1/2}$ two-photon transitions in $^{87}$Rb is conclusively determined, with no a priori knowledge about their optical frequency.

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