

Trade-off for Leakage Power Reduction in Deep Sub Micron SRAM Design

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ABSTRACT- Present day electronic industry faces the major problem of standby leakage current, as the processor speed increases, there is requirement of high speed cache memory. SRAM being mainly used for cache memory design, several low power techniques are being used for SRAM cell design. Full CMOS 6T SRAM cell is the most preferred choice for digital circuits. This paper reviews various leakage power techniques used in 6T SRAM cell and their comparative study.

Keywords- CMOS; SRAM; SNM; DRV

1. INTRODUCTION

Power consumption particularly off-state leakage current is the major technical problem being faced by present day electronic industry. As the chip densities increase to a billion of transistors or more, power is the major limiter of design performance or integration. According to International Technology Roadmap for Semiconductors (ITRS) projections, the number of transistors per chip and the local clock frequencies for high- performance microprocessors will continue to grow exponentially in next 10 years too. As the speed of microprocessor based electronic equipment increases, there is requirement of large quantity of data at very high speed which is difficult accomplish. This has led to design of cache memory as major concern. Mostly SRAM is used for cache memory design and full CMOS 6T SRAM cell is preferred choice mostly. Static (or leakage) power affects all kinds of Complementary Metal Oxide Semiconductor (CMOS) circuits but is particularly critical for Static Random Access Memories (SRAMs) since memories have been designed as performance being the primary figure of merit and also memories are accessed in small portions, thereby leaving vast majority of memory cells unaccessed for large fraction of time [1]. As reported in International Technical Roadmap for Semiconductors (ITRS), transistors devoted to memory structures in microprocessor based system is about 70% today and is expected to increase to 80% in near future [2]. In recent years, the demand for low power has led to development of different techniques for leakage reduction in SRAM cells at various abstraction; architecture, device and circuit level. This paper presents exhaustive review of circuit level techniques to reduce leakage in SRAM cell. There are various

architectures of SRAM cell like 6T, 7T, 9T, 12T etc. In this paper 6T CMOS SRAM cell is considered due to its superior robustness, low power and low voltage operation [3].

2. LEAKAGE COMPONENTS IN BULK CMOS

Leakage power in CMOS transistor originates from various sources corresponding to various leakage currents flowing in it. Most of the leakage current occurs in standby mode i.e. when the channel is nonconducting.



Figure 1. Leakage current components in MOS transistor [4]

Fig.1 shows the main components of leakage current in MOS transistors. Major types of leakage currents are: sub threshold leakage I_{sub} , gate induced drain leakage I_{GIDL} and depletion punch through leakage $I_{punchthrough}$. Besides these, gate tunneling leakage through bulk, source and drain I_{gb} , I_{gs} and I_{gd} (also I_{gate}) and p-n junction leakage current I_{jn} also exists independent of the state of channel.

2.1 Subthreshold Leakage Current

It is the drain to source current of a transistor when the gate to source voltage is lower than threshold voltage (V_T) . It is due to carrier diffusion between the drain and source regions of transistor in weak inversion. The behavior of MOS transistor in subthreshold operating region is similar to that of bipolar device and subthreshold current exhibits exponential dependence on gate voltage.

2.2 Gate Leakage Current

The electric field across the oxide increases if the thickness of gate oxide is reduced. This high electric field results in exponential increase of gate oxide tunneling current due to increase in tunneling probability of electron through the gate oxide.



2.3 Junction Leakage Current

The reverse biased junction leakage current has two main components.

(i) Caused by EHP generation in the depletion region of reverse biased junction.

(ii) Due to minority carriers diffusion near the edge of depletion region.

The junction leakage current is quite small and mainly exhibits in access transistors of SRAM memory cell.

In CMOS logic for long channel length (L) transistor, $(L> 1\mu m)$, very small leakage current exists. For short channel (L>180nm) and $t_{ox}>30^{\circ}A$, subthreshold leakage dominates. For very small channel length (L>90nm) and $t_{ox}>20^{\circ}A$, both subthreshold and gate leakage are considered and for nanoscale channel (L< 90nm) and $t_{ox} < 20^{\circ}$ A, three major leakage currents considered are: subthreshold leakage, gate leakage and junction leakage current. Device material technology has managed to keep gate leakage under control by use of high kdielectrics. Also the junction leakage current is critical mainly for strong reverse biased junctions and reverse biasing is used selectively and with moderate amount of bias for performance reasons, so the major relevant component of leakage current to be considered is subthreshold leakage.

3. SUBTHRESHOLD LEAKAGE

6T SRAM cell depicted in Fig. 2 is used for reference. Subthreshold leakage occurs when transistor is off and drain to source voltage (V_{ds}) is non-zero. Leakage current can occur either inside the bit cell or in access transistors paths as shown in Fig. 2.



Figure 2. Leakage Currents in 6T SRAM cell [5]

Which transistor is actually leaking depends on (i) the value stored, (ii) the logic level of the wordline and (iii) the type of operation (i.e. the value of bitlines).

4. LEAKAGE CURRENT REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

Several different improved design techniques at different level of VLSI design like system, architectural, circuit and device levels are being put into practice to achieve the objective of reduced power consumption. These include voltage supply scaling, clock gating, bus encoding, use of current mode sensing techniques, use of sleep modes, use of data retention voltage etc. which provide an approach towards reducing energy consumption while maintaining the performance.

4.1 Device level techniques

At this level following techniques are used:

(i) New material and process techniques are used to control channel length, oxide thickness, junction depth and concentration distribution of transistors [6-7]. K. Koh in the year 2003 proposed 6T SRAM cell using buried channel PMOS technology. The major source of leakage current on NMOS and PMOS devices was different pathways, and it was controlled by reduction of gate poly-Si oxidation thickness and the optimization of LDD implantation process.

S.Zhao in the year 2004 presented a transistor optimization methodology tailored for wireless, digital consumer, and mobile applications that employ power management circuit techniques. This methodology is applied to a 65nm technology that supports a highdensity (<0.5 um²) embedded 6T SRAM cell. High performance logic ($I_{dn}/I_{dp} = 550/300 uA/um$ at $L_{poly} =$ 39nm) and low leakage are achieved simultaneously by employing a data retention mode for the SRAM (Ileakage ~2pA/bit). Retention mode bias conditions and selective gate sizing in the SRAM reduces leakage by ~300X. Advanced transistor design including SSR channel, strain engineering, drain-extension (HDD) offset spacer, and HDD and halo profile optimization is used to achieve at least an additional 4× reduction in leakage.

(ii) An optimized NiSi process, high angle and low dose halo implants contribute to reduced junction leakage and Gate Induced Drain Leakage [8].

A. Steegan in the year 2005 presented low power SRAM cell using 65nm technology offering a dual gate oxide process, multiple Vt devices at a nominal operating voltage of 1.2V, a nine level hierarchical Cu interconnect back-end of line process with low k dielectrics and 0.676mum² and 0.54mum² SRAM cells, optimized for performance and density, respectively. A gate dielectric with an NFET leakage current as low as 15pA/mum and with exceptional reliability characteristics has been demonstrated.



(iii) FINFET are used to improve gate control over the channel length which reduces short channel effects and subthreshold leakage current [9].

4.2 Architecture level techniques

(i) This includes multiple mode management which put most unused memory sections into sleep or turn-off mode to achieve a large leakage reduction because only a small fraction of SRAM works at a time [10-11].

C. H. Kim in the year 2006 proposed a simple circuit technique that adaptively trades off overhead energy for maximum leakage savings under severe leakage variations. The proposed run-time leakage reduction technique for on-die SRAM caches considers architectural access behavior to determine how often the SRAM blocks should enter a sleep mode. A self-decay circuit generates a periodic sleep pulse with an adaptive pulse period, which puts the SRAM array into a sleep mode more frequently at high leakage conditions (fast process, high temperature) and vice versa.

4.3 Circuit level techniques

4.3.1 Body biasing method

Subthreshold leakage current is exponentially dependent on threshold voltage which in turn depends on substrate bias effect or body effect. Body biasing can be used in standby mode to raise the threshold voltage and hence reduce sub threshold leakage during standby mode in SRAM cell. It can be of two types: Reverse body biasing or forward body biasing. But, the effectiveness of the reverse body-biasing scheme decreases with technology scaling, due to aggravating of the body effect caused by the shorter channel length. In addition, source- bulk, drain- bulk leakage current, band-to-band tunneling current exponentially increase at the source-bulk and drain-bulk PN junctions

4.3.1.1 Reverse body biasing

Dynamic V_T SRAM (DTSRAM) architecture has been proposed to reduce subthreshold leakage in cache memories. Using DTSRAM simulation results show that leakage current saving of 72% can be achieved for 64KB L1 instruction cache at 180nm technology [12]. As shown in Fig. 3, if V_{BN} is increased or V_{PN} is lowered in standby mode then it produces substrate bias effect thereby raising threshold voltage and hence reducing sub threshold leakage.



In active mode, the body biasing voltage is back to zero without effecting access time and data stability.

4.3.1.2 Reverse body biasing

Forward body biasing technique can be used to reduce active and standby leakage power in cache memories. In this technique, V_{PN} for selected SRAM cells is increased to increase the threshold voltage in active mode so as to achieve fast operation [13]. This scheme improves device performance, suppresses short channel effects and threshold voltage roll-off and hence more applicable for lower technologies when compared with reverse body biasing scheme. But this technique has larger junction capacitance and body effect so reduces delay improvement especially in stacked circuits.

It is more effective to combine the two schemes, i.e., use reverse body biasing in standby mode to reduce leakage current and use forward body biasing in active mode for high performance. Forward body biasing and high threshold voltage devices along with reverse body biasing provide 20 times the leakage reduction while reverse body biasing and low threshold devices provide three times leakage reduction [14].

4.3.2 Source biasing method

The concept of gated ground (NMOS transistor inserted between ground line and the SRAM cell) to achieve significant reduction in leakage energy without compromising on performance [15] has been proposed. As shown in Fig.4, extra pull-down NMOS transistor is inserted between ground and source line of SRAM cell as a result of which the ground voltage V_{SL} in standby mode is raised to achieve large reduction in leakage current.



Figure 4. Source biasing scheme [5]

In active mode, WL is high and so M7 is ON, since its resistance is very small so V_{SL} almost functions as real ground line and SRAM functions as a conventional SRAM cell.

In standby mode, WL is set low so M7 turns off and V_{SL} is high. This results in reduction of sub-threshold and gate leakage current. High V_{SL} produces body effect that raises threshold voltage associated with reduced signal rail (V_{DD} - V_{SL}) and so sub-threshold leakage current is reduced. This scheme also reduces the effect of DIBL due to reduction in voltage difference between drain and source terminals.

The disadvantage of this scheme is that addition of extra transistor M7 in the pull down path will get a delay penalty, increasing both area and dynamic energy consumption. To minimize the area overhead, pull down transistor is often shared by bank of SRAM cells.

4.3.3 Dynamic V_{DD} method

In the active mode, a normal supply voltage is applied to a conventional read /write operation, without delay penalty .Whereas under the standby mode, a reduction in the supply voltage effectively decreases the sub threshold, gate, and junction leakage current The greatest drawbacks of this scheme are the substantial increase in the SER (soft error rate), with voltage scaling, the reduced supply voltage results in a lower static noise margin and possible data flipping failures and an extra peripheral circuitry such as a high efficiency voltage converter is required and a significant wake-up access time and dynamic power latency are introduced, with respect to the conventional 6T SRAM cell, when switching between different modes.

Dual power supply scheme has been proposed to combine with dynamic voltage scheme [16] to reduce leakage power in SRAM. Subthreshold, gate and junction leakage current can be effectively reduced by reducing supply voltage in standby mode but it results in lower SNM and possible data flipping failures. It also requires extra peripheral circuitry such as high efficiency voltage converter. With lower V_{DD} , leakage power is reduced but it becomes difficult to guarantee data retention.

It has also been demonstrated that simultaneous use of adaptive body biasing (ABB) and dynamic voltage scheme (DVS) can be used to reduce power in high-performance processors. The results demonstrate that application of simultaneous DVS and ABB results in an average energy reduction of 48% over DVS alone [17].

4.3.4 Negative wordline method

This scheme aims at generating a negative voltage that is supplied to the word line during idle time without affecting the device performance or SER. Since a negative voltage is supplied, the access transistors are turned off strongly, thereby leading to a reduction in the sub threshold leakage current of the access transistors [18]. Row-by-Row dynamic V_{DD} (RDVV) scheme has been proposed for low power SRAM design where V_{DD} of each row is dynamically controlled to reduce cell leakage by exploiting DIBL effect [19].

It has also been proposed to use row-by-row dynamic source line voltage control (RRDSV) technique where the source line shared by neighboring cells is dynamically driven by voltage higher than $V_{\rm SS}$ to reduce the leakage current when the cells are not activated [20].

The greatest drawbacks of this scheme are that the gate leakage current of access transistors increases as a result of enlarged gate-source and gate drain voltage differences and just like the dynamic *VDD* scheme; there is dynamic power overhead and an extra voltage generator needed for providing the negative voltage.



Figure 5. Negative wordline scheme [4]

4.3.5 Bitline floating method

Leakage reduction technique by using leakage biased bitlines has been presented for low power SRAM design [21]. In 6T SRAM cell shown in Fig. 2, when the voltage of bitline (BLB) is nv1, the voltage difference between source and drain of access transistor M6 is zero, hence its sub-threshold current is negligible. If memory cells store '0', then BL is set to '0' and BLB is set to '1', this reduces bitline leakage current. The leakage current of access transistors via DIBL can be reduced in standby mode by the technique that turns-off pre-charge transistors and allows bitlines to float. The bitlines are disconnected from sense amplifier by column multiplexer and there is no leakage path introduced.





Figure 6. Bitline Floating scheme [5]

This technique however leads to speed latency due to extra pre-charge cycle.

4.3.6 MTCMOS method

Auto back gate controlled MTCMOS [22] has been presented for low power SRAM design. The experimental results show that the leakage current is reduced to 1/1000 in sleep mode. It controls the backgates to reduce the leakage current when the SRAM is not activated (sleep mode) while retaining the data stored in the memory cells. The active power is 0.27mW/MHz at 1 V, which is a reduction of 1/12 of a conventional SRAM with a 3.3 V [22]. It uses low V_T transistors to obtain high speed and low leakage while high V_T NMOS and PMOS transistors are placed between the cell and ground and supply and memory cell respectively as shown in Fig.7.



Figure 7. MTCMOS technique

In active mode, high V_T transistors are ON and memory cell formed by low V_T transistors operates normally as conventional 6T SRAM cell, while in standby mode high V_T transistors are OFF, transistors go in sleep mode and so the memory cell is disconnected from supply and ground. This reduces leakage current of memory cell in standby mode.

4.3.7 Dual V_T and dual tox method

A variation of MTCMOS technique is the Dual V_{T} technique, which uses transistors with two different

threshold voltages. Low-threshold transistors are used for the gates on the critical path and high-threshold transistors are used for those not in the critical path. Method based on dual threshold voltage method has been demonstrated to reduce the leakage power dissipation of SRAMs while maintaining their performance. Experimental results show that this technique can reduce the leakage-power dissipation of a 64Kb SRAM by more than 35%. This method improves static noise margin under process variations [23]

In both MTCMOS and Dual V_T methods, additional mask layers for each value of threshold voltage are required for fabricating the transistors selectively according to their assigned threshold voltage values. This makes the fabrication process complex.

It has also been proposed to use dual V_T and dual t_{OX} for low power SRAM design [24], this method has neither area nor delay overhead. Simulation results with a 65-nm process demonstrate that this technique can reduce the total leakage power dissipation of a 64 times 512 SRAM array by 33% and that of a 32 times 512 SRAM array by 40%.

4.3.8 PP SRAM bit cell structure

PP SRAM Bit –Cell structure has been presented, in which the two NMOS access transistors (of Fig.2) have been replaced by the two high- V_T PMOS access transistors [25]. It is based on the view that the gate leakage (gate oxide direct tunneling) current will be lower than that of the leakage offered by the NMOS transistors in the ideal mode of the bit-cell. It utilizes the Dual Threshold Voltage technology with Forward Body Biasing (FBB) to reduce the subthreshold leakage without losing the performance. As compared to the conventional 6T SRAM Bit-cell, this work reduces the total gate leakage current by 27% and the idle power by 37% with no access time degradation and an improvement in the SNM by 15% in 45nm CMOS technology at $V_{DD} = 0.8V$.

4.3.9 Stacking of transistors and zig-zag approach

The leakage currents can be minimized by using effective stacking of transistors using stack technique and by zig-zag approach [26]. The proposed stack technique forces a stack effect by breaking down an existing transistor into two half size transistors as shown in Fig. 8. Reverse bias is induced between the two transistors when the two transistors are turned off together, this results in subthreshold leakage current reduction. The zig-zag technique reduces wake-up overhead caused by sleep transistors by placement of alternating sleep transistors, assuming a particular preselected input vector.





Figure 8. Stack Approach [26]

Simulation results when carried out on 90nm technology demonstrate 35.95% and 91.90% power saving by zig-zag SRAM and stack SRAM respectively.

4.3.10 Leakage control transistor (LECTOR) technique

LECTOR technique for leakage power reduction in SRAM has been presented [27]. This approach is based on effective stacking of transistors in the path from supply voltage to ground. The basic idea behind LECTOR is based on the concept that a state with more than one transistor OFF in a path from supply voltage to ground is far less leaky than a state with only one transistor OFF in any supply to ground path.

5. COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT LEAKAGE POWER REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

The following table summarizes comparative study of leakage power reduction techniques used in 6T CMOS SRAM cell.

Table 1. Comparison of different SRAM leakage power reduction techniques

Leakage Reduction Technique	Effect on leakage current	Advantage	Disadvantage
Reverse body biasing scheme	Subthreshold leakage reduces while junction leakage increases	Performance is retained as delay and SNM value remains almost the same	Effectiveness reduces for lower technologies
Forward body biasing scheme combined with high V _{th} devices	Subthreshold leakage decreases	$\begin{array}{c} Suppresses \\ short channel \\ effect and V_T \\ roll-off so \\ applicable for \\ lower \\ technologies \end{array}$	Reduces delay improvement especially in stacked circuits

Source biasing scheme	Subthreshold, gate and junction leakage all decrease	SNM of memory cell is improved	Increases delay, dynamic energy consumption and area of cell
Dynamic V _{dd} scheme	Subthreshold, gate and junction leakage all decrease	SNM of memory cell is improved and possible data flipping failures are lowered	Extra peripheral circuitry like high efficiency voltage converter is required and wake up access time and dynamic power latency are introduced.
Negative Wordline	Subthreshold leakage reduces	Device performance and SER remains unaffected	Gate leakage of access transistors is increased and extra voltage generator needed for providing the negative voltage
Bitline floating scheme	Subthreshold and gate leakage of access transistors decrease	SNM of memory cell is retained	Speed latency because of requirement of extra pre- charge cycle
MTCMOS technique	Subthreshold leakage decreases	Delay reduces	Fabrication process is complex. Data is lost as soon as the power is off.
Leakage Reduction Technique	Effect on leakage current	Advantage	Disadvantage
Dual V _T Technique	Subthreshold leakage decreases	SNM improves	Fabrication process is complex
PP SRAM bit cell strucure	Reduces Subthreshold leakage current	SNM improves	Degrades access time
Stacking of transistors and zig- zag approach	Subthreshold leakage is reduced	Zig-zag approach reduces wake- up overhead of sleep transistors	Stack effect cause significant increase in delay.



6. CONCLUSION

Standby leakage power in SRAM is of major concern as the technology is scaled down. This article reviews various existing leakage power reduction techniques and also presents their comparative study giving advantage and disadvantage of each technique. Each technique has its own effect on leakage power and device performance and proper trade-off has to be made between power consumption and device performance.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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