5. Altermagnetism – Science and Technology

The discovery of altermagnetism has emerged as a new class of magnetic order

Understanding Magnetism (Basic Concept)

Magnetism arises from the motion of electric charges, primarily due to the spin and orbital motion of electrons within atoms. Only certain materials—largely those containing iron (Fe), nickel (Ni), cobalt (Co), and their alloys—exhibit strong magnetic properties, because their atomic structures allow unpaired electron spins. The interaction between these spins determines the type of magnetic ordering within a material.

Traditional Types of Magnetism (Recognized for Over a Century)

A. Ferromagnetism - Atomic magnetic moments align parallel in the same direction. Results in a strong net magnetic field observable externally. Real-world examples - Permanent magnets, refrigerator magnets, iron nails. Materials exhibit hysteresis, meaning they retain magnetization even after the external field is removed.

B. Antiferromagnetism - Neighbouring spins align anti-parallel (up–down, up–down), cancelling out each other's magnetic fields. Results in zero net magnetization, making the material appear non-magnetic from the outside. Common in materials like MnO, NiO. Shows ordered structure but lacks external magnetic effect due to perfect spin cancellation.

Discovery of a New Type of Magnetism - Altermagnetism

Theorized in 2019; experimentally confirmed in 2024, marking a historic breakthrough in condensed matter physics. Hybrid behaviour that combines characteristics of antiferromagnets (zero net magnetization) and ferromagnets (spin-dependent electronic structure). Belongs to a new symmetry class where internal electron behaviour is altered without creating external magnetism.

What is Altermagnetism? (Detailed Explanation)

A. Core Concept - Neighbouring atomic spins point in opposite directions, similar to antiferromagnetism. These opposite spins cancel each other → no net magnetization. But *inside* the material, electrons with spin-up and spin-down have different energy levels, similar to ferromagnets.

B. Why It Is Unique - Combines zero stray magnetic field with spin splitting (energy difference between spins). This unique combination arises from the crystal symmetry and alternating atomic environments—hence the name alter-magnetism. It produces internal spin polarisation without external magnetisation, something previously thought impossible.

C. Crystal Symmetry Aspect - In altermagnets, rotating or mirror-flipping the crystal structure pairs atoms whose spins cancel each other. But their electronic band structure does not cancel, creating spin-dependent transport properties.

Material Characteristics - Can exist in a wide range of material classes, unlike ferromagnetism and antiferromagnetism which are mostly metals or oxides -

1. Insulators
2. Semiconductors
3. Metals
4. Possibly organic crystals (future potential)

   This universality gives altermagnets high potential in next-generation device engineering.

Applications and Technological Significance

A. Spintronics - Altermagnets enable spin-polarised currents without producing disturbing external magnetic fields. Benefits -

1. Faster switching speeds
2. Lower energy consumption
3. Smaller and more stable memory devices

   Ideal for developing MRAM, spin valves, magnetic sensors, etc.

B. Quantum Computing - Quantum bits (qubits) are extremely sensitive to external noise, especially magnetic noise. Altermagnets provide magnetic functionality without stray fields, reducing

decoherence.
Promising for -
1. Coherent qubit control
2. Spin-based quantum gates
3. Noise-free control circuits

C. Next-Generation Electronics

Their ability to work in all material types opens pathways for -
1. Reconfigurable logic circuits
2. Ultra-low-power devices
3. Highly efficient data storage

Key Challenges in Altermagnetism Research

A. High-Quality Material Synthesis - Producing single-domain, defect-free altermagnetic crystals is difficult. Even slight impurities or disorders can disturb their delicate spin structures.

B. Fabrication and Device Integration - Need scalable, reproducible fabrication methods for commercial applications. Must integrate with semiconductor processing technologies.

C. Limited Verified Materials - Only a few materials, such as -
1. Manganese Telluride (MnTe)
2. Chromium Antimonide (CrSb)

It have clearly demonstrated altermagnetic behaviour. Expanding the library is a top global research priority.

D. Measurement Challenges - Detecting internal spin imbalance without net magnetisation requires advanced tools like -
1. Spin-resolved photoemission
2. Neutron scattering
3. Angle-resolved spectroscopy

Way Forward

A. Research Directions - Discovery of more altermagnetic materials across different crystal structures. Development of low-cost bulk synthesis and thin-film growth techniques. Creation of altermagnet-based prototype spintronic devices.

B. Industrial Potential

Potential to revolutionize -
1. Data storage
2. Logic devices
3. Quantum information systems
4. Low-power electronics

Similar to how semiconductors revolutionized technology in the 20th century, altermagnets may shape post-silicon, spin-based computing.

C. Global Scientific Momentum - Rapid increase in research since 2019. Major laboratories in Europe, US, Japan, and China focusing on altermagnet-based materials science. Strong prospects for breakthroughs in the next decade.

Conclusion

Altermagnetism represents a new paradigm bridging ferromagnetism and antiferromagnetism. With no net magnetisation but strong spin-polarised behaviour, it is uniquely positioned to power spintronics and quantum technologies. Despite challenges in synthesis and scalability, ongoing research indicates immense potential for next-generation electronics and quantum devices.

Source - https - //www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/science/altermagnetism-emerges-as-a-new-class-of-magnetic-order-what-is-it/article70261367.ece