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A Broadband Conversion Loss Measurement Technique for Terahertz Harmonic Mixers

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Abstract—This letter presents an experimental characterization technique for assessing the performance of terahertz harmonic mixers across a wide frequency range. The total signal transfer loss of three mixers was measured in both up- and down-conversion configurations, and the conversion loss was determined through the solution of a linear system of equations. The proposed method uses LO signals with a frequency offset to ensure single sideband measurements, thereby eliminating the need for image-reject filters. The three-mixer method was verified by measurements of millimeter-wave mixers, which matched the traditional characterization method using a calibrated source and power meter. Given this successful millimeter-wave demonstration, we characterized three WM-86 Schottky diode $\times 4$ -harmonic mixers from 2.2 to 3 THz. This technique presents a notable advantage for conducting broadband mixer characterizations, particularly in the terahertz frequency regime which lacks tunable, wide-band sources.

Index Terms—Frequency converters, harmonic mixers, heterodyne receivers, sub-millimeter wave mixers, terahertz metrology.

I. INTRODUCTION

FREQUENCY translation devices, commonly known as mixers, play a pivotal role in radio systems and heterodyne instrumentation [1]. Notably, harmonic mixers have recently gained significant prominence and have become integral components in various test and measurement instruments, including signal and spectrum analyzers, frequency counters, and frequency stabilization systems [2], [3].

Since the advent of crystal diode rectifiers for frequency conversion in the early 1900s, extensive research has been conducted to assess mixer performance accurately. Traditionally, mixer conversion loss has been evaluated through techniques such as the Y-factor power-meter method [4], variable

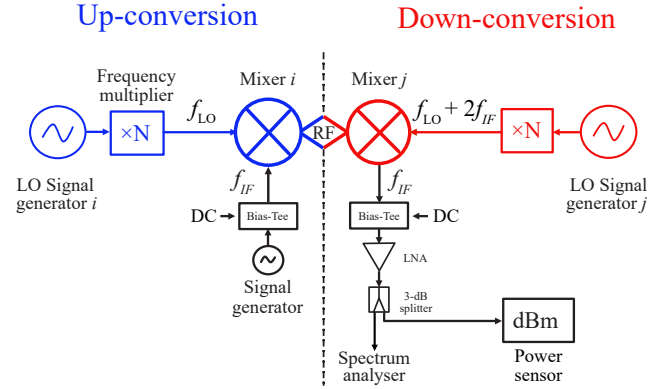


Fig. 1: Mixer characterization method. Schematic showing the up-down conversion setup.

attenuator-method [5], and scalar and vector mixer calibration approach [6], [7]. However, mixers utilizing higher-order harmonics exhibit high conversion loss [8]–[10], rendering the Y-factor method impractical. Furthermore, the absence of calibrated power sources at terahertz (THz) frequencies also imposes limitations on mixer characterization using the aforementioned conventional methods. Although the emergence of far-infrared optical sources like quantum-cascade lasers (QCLs) has accelerated progress in THz mixers, the lack of tunable and wide-band sources remains a significant constraint. This limitation underscores the critical need for an alternative measurement technique to characterize THz mixers across a broad frequency range.

In this letter, we adopt the ‘three-antenna measurement method’ [11] proposed by Beatty in 1967 [12] for characterizing THz harmonic mixers. We provide a detailed explanation of the theoretical underpinnings governing the conversion loss extraction, assuming reciprocal conditions in section II. The latter part of this section delineates the experimental arrangement for single sideband (SSB) measurements, which features WM-86¹ $\times 4$ -harmonic mixers with integrated diagonal horns arranged head-to-head and are driven by solid-state LO sources. Section III presents broadband conversion loss measurements of WM-86 $\times 4$ -harmonic mixer spanning from 2.2 to 3 THz. Finally, we validate the effectiveness of this

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¹RF waveguide name designation. ‘W’ stands for waveguide, ‘M’ for metric, and the number is the waveguide width in micrometers [13].

method by comparing it with the conventional measurement technique within the millimeter-wave frequency range.

II. METHOD

The conversion loss of a mixer can be found by measuring the total signal transfer loss, $L_t = L_i^{up} \cdot L_j^{down}$, through an up-conversion (IF to RF) in mixer i , which is directly down-converted in mixer j (RF to IF) for a set of N different mixers; see Fig. 1. To ensure single-sideband (SSB) measurements, the mixer's image response is filtered out using two local oscillator signals (LO_i and LO_j) with a frequency difference twice the intermediate frequency ($2 \times f_{IF}$), as shown in 1. This approach entails utilizing the upper sideband as an RF signal for one of the mixers and the lower sideband for the other. The IF signal is kept constant, and the two synchronized LO signals are swept to perform a broadband conversion loss measurement. To minimize errors due to re-connections of the LO signal, we have utilized dedicated LO sources, each one paired with a specific mixer (DUT), see Fig. 1. In this way, the mixer's pump (LO) and bias conditions, critical for the mixer's performance, are kept the same during different measurements.

Most terahertz waveguide mixes include an integrated horn antenna to reduce the RF waveguide loss and to avoid the effects of flange misalignment [14]. However, due to the complexity of the implementation of quasi-optical systems [15] and the losses incurred by atmospheric attenuation at THz frequencies, we decided to employ a straightforward head-to-head alignment for the horns. This alignment strategy presents two drawbacks: it introduces a few decibels of coupling loss and generates standing waves within the RF chain. It is, therefore, not feasible to compensate for systematic errors due to standing waves between the RF ports. Additionally, the return loss at the IF ports is also neglected. Furthermore, 'magnitude' reciprocity is assumed for the mixer up and down conversion loss, ($|L_i^{up}| = |L_i^{down}|$), which is a valid approximation for a passive mixer [16].

Using three mixers (X, Y, and Z), the signal transfer, L_t , is measured in both directions for each combination of mixer pairs, resulting in six measurements. In logarithmic scale (dB), the set of measurements results in a linear system of equations, $AL = L_t$, where A is a coefficient matrix, L is a vector with each mixer's conversion loss, and L_t contains total measured signal loss. Since we restricted the number of re-connections, the mixer conditions are almost identical, except for one mixer tested under two LO conditions (LO_i and LO_j) for either lower or upper sideband mode. Hence, it is necessary to include an extra unknown, and, in this case, the overall equation system contains six measurements and four unknowns, resulting in a non-square matrix 1.

A least-square approximation that minimizes the error, defined as $|AL - L_t|^2$, can be found by solving $A^T AL = A^T L_t$. If the upper and lower sideband conversion loss is assumed to be identical, three measurements are enough to provide an analytical solution [17], [18]. However, the least square technique helps to suppress the effect of measurement uncertainties, and we found that the system with four unknowns resulted in a much lower ripple across the frequency band and, therefore, the primary method used in the article.

$$\begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} L_X^{USB} \\ L_X^{LSB} \\ L_Y^{LSB} \\ L_Z^{USB} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} L_t^1 \\ L_t^2 \\ L_t^3 \\ L_t^4 \\ L_t^5 \\ L_t^6 \end{bmatrix} \quad (1)$$

A. Experimental setup

The device-under-test (DUT) is a $\times 4$ -harmonic, single-ended, integrated GaAs Schottky diode mixer from VDI, based on the design in [10]. The mixers were dc-biased using a constant current source. The mixer circuitry is assembled in an E-plane split block with an integrated WM-86 rectangular waveguide and a standard diagonal horn of about 5-mm long, 0.56-mm \times 0.56-mm aperture [19]. The two mixers are aligned head-to-head as shown in Fig. 2.

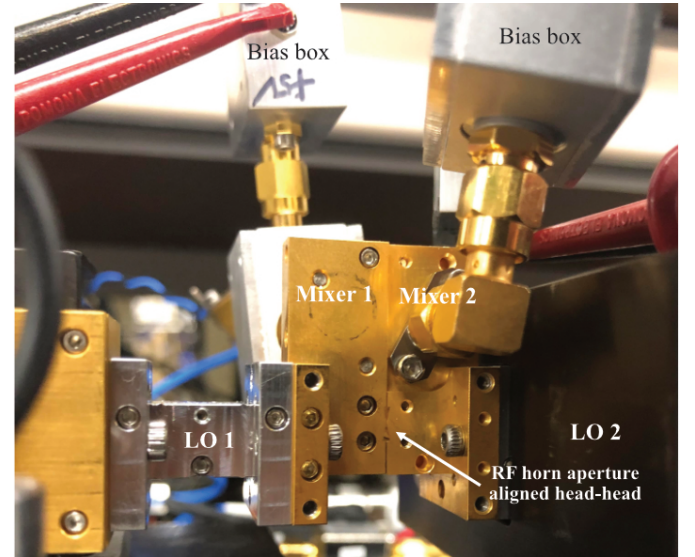


Fig. 2: Measurement setup. Photograph of the WM-86 $\times 4$ -harmonic mixers with integrated diagonal horn aligned head-to-head. The mixers are driven by WM-380 $\times 54$ active multiplier chain (AMC) LO sources from VDI [20].

The WM-86 $\times 4$ -harmonic are pumped by WM-380 $\times 54$ AMC source with available output power about 0.3-2 mW² in the frequency range 550–750 GHz [20]. For up-conversion, 1-GHz IF signal generated by Keysight MXG analog signal generator N5183B with a power level of -20 dBm was fed to the mixer via a bias-tee. To pump the mixer, the signal from one of the sources in Keysight vector network analyzer PNA-X N5222B with direct digital synthesizer (DDS) was swept in frequency and multiplied by WM-380 $\times 54$ AMC source to generate the LO signal from 550 to 750 GHz. The RF signal generated by the up-conversion mixer was

²The available output power of the three LO multiplier chains was measured using a VDI Erickson power meter PM5 and was corrected for the loss in the WR-10 taper.

coupled to the down-conversion mixer, as shown in Fig. 2. The down-converted IF signal from the mixer was amplified by low-noise amplifiers (LNA) with 60-dB gain and was evaluated in a spectrum analyzer. The insertion loss of the cables, LNA, band-pass filter, and 3-dB splitter used in this measurements were characterized and de-embedded [21]. The signal generator, VNA, and spectrum analyzer were phase-locked to a common microwave reference signal.

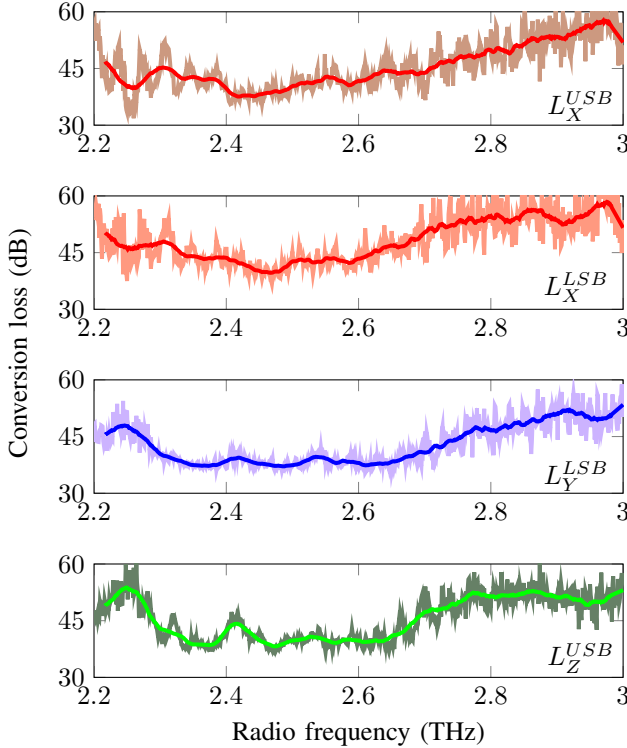


Fig. 3: Conversion loss of three WM-86 $\times 4$ -harmonic mixers extracted using the least-square method plotted versus frequency. The shaded lines are the raw extracted data, and the colored lines are the smoothed data using the Savitzky-Golay finite impulse response (FIR) filter with a polynomial order of 1 and frame length 35 [22]. Note: USB-Upper sideband, LSB-Lower sideband.

III. RESULTS

A. Sub-mm wave mixer measurements

Based on the extraction procedure described in Section II, conversion loss of three WM-86 $\times 4$ -harmonic mixers were evaluated from 2.2 to 3 THz as shown in Fig. 3. Mixer 'X' utilized both upper and lower side-bands during the up- and down-conversion process, which resulted in four unknowns. Additionally, the observed ripples in the data are attributed to standing waves and parasitic modes in the RF chain [23], which is the main source of error for this specific measurement. This was verified by electromagnetic (EM) simulation of two horns aligned head-to-head, which resulted in an insertion loss ripple in the order of 5 dB. Still, the smoothed data [22] represents a reasonable estimate of the harmonic mixer conversion loss. It is also notable that as the conversion

loss surpasses 50 dB, the noise levels increase, eventually approaching the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) limit of the setup. Therefore, the insufficient link budget in this frequency range cannot allow any attenuator or free-space measurements [24] to overcome the standing waves in the RF chain.

B. Verification at mm-wave

To verify the method outlined in section II, we conducted a characterization study in the millimeter-wave spectrum spanning from 50 to 75 GHz. Three WR-15³ sub-harmonic ($\times 2$) mixers [25] were characterized in the experimental configuration depicted in the inset of Fig. 4. To mitigate the impact of standing waves, an isolator was introduced between the mixers. The resultant outcomes, obtained by solving the system of linear equations [17], were compared with a single-mixer measurement performed with a calibrated source. The comparison, illustrated in Fig. 4, demonstrates good agreement, with discrepancies within ± 1 dB across the frequency band.

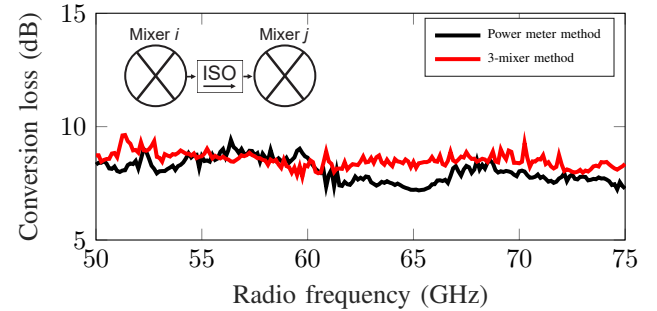


Fig. 4: Comparison of analytically extracted conversion loss using the three-mixer method and conventional measurement of a single mixer with a calibrated source and power meter.

IV. CONCLUSION

We demonstrated the first experimental characterization of THz mixers from 2.2 to 3 THz. A key aspect of this technique is utilizing LO signals with a frequency offset to ensure SSB measurements, thereby eliminating the need for image-reject filters, which are challenging to implement at THz frequencies. We adopted a straightforward approach to simplify the alignment process, albeit at the cost of additional losses due to sub-optimal coupling and the occurrence of standing waves in the RF chain. A detailed uncertainty analysis of the proposed method requires a well-defined RF coupling and, preferably, IF/RF mismatch measurements, which were not feasible in this work. This technique proves to be highly effective for mixer characterization, particularly in the terahertz frequency region where there is a shortage of broadband, tunable sources.

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³WR - Rectangular Waveguide, the number is the waveguide width in mils multiplied by 10. (1 mils = 1/1000 inch).

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