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Secondary Instability as Cause of Minor Disruptions in Density Limit Tokamak Plasmas

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ABSTRACT

Experimental evidence was found in JET plasmas, of a new instability at the onset of minor disruptions. This instability is observed during the growth of the well known $m = n = 2 = 1$ magnetic island and is localized close to it, behaving as a secondary instability to the island. The large heat fluxes towards the plasma edge, characteristic of minor disruptions, occur during the low rotation phase of the magnetic island at a time the amplitude of the secondary instability suffers a large increase. No poloidal or toroidal mode numbers could be assigned to the secondary instability.

INTRODUCTION

Major disruptions are the most dangerous instabilities in tokamak plasmas. They completely destroy the confinement of plasma thermal energy and plasma current. High fusion yield plasmas have a parameter space prone to disruptions either because they need to have high density or because they need a radiating mantle to relieve the heat load from the divertor. Understanding the cause and dynamics of major disruptions will improve the strategies to avoid or ameliorate their effects, which is a relevant issue for ITER. A well established [1, 2] sequence of events in the precursor of density limit disruptions starts with the radiative contraction of the current profile, caused by increase of electron density with impurity accumulation in the edge. Contraction of the current profile follows, which destabilizes MHD modes, mainly an $m = n = 2 = 1$ tearing mode (where m and n are the poloidal and toroidal Fourier mode numbers, respectively). During the growth of this magnetic island minor disruptions may be observed before the major disruption occurs.

Minor disruptions are characterized by a sudden large heat flux across the $q = 2$ surface towards the plasma edge [1]. The adjective minor refers to the fact that only a fraction of the plasma energy is lost and the plasma current is not affected. The plasma can recover from minor disruptions but if no action is taken to control the evolution of the island at $q = 2$, a major disruption will end the plasma. A question that has received attention is the cause of the sudden heat flux to the plasma edge. An well known proposal to answer this question is based on the interaction between MHD tearing modes at different rational surfaces from $q \leq 1$ to $q \leq 2$. Island overlapping is expected to provoke ergodization of magnetic field lines increasing radial transport. Despite the calculated ergodic magnetic field is a vacuum field it is assumed that the same field will also occur in the plasma. At odds with this proposal are observations of minor disruptions with non overlapping $2/1$ and $1/1$ modes in the plasma. Also, heat flux across the $q = 2$ surface is asymmetric in relation to the X point and it is intermittent. Moreover in the region $1.6 < q < 2$, large electron temperature gradients are observed during the minor disruption close to $q = 1$ indicating that energy confinement is locally very high.

This paper will address the questions raised by these observations, namely why a large magnetic island only destroys energy confinement intermittently and asymmetrically. The experimental observation of a secondary instability to the magnetic island is proposed as the cause of minor disruptions. Magnetic islands with high m, n values have been observed close to the $2/1$ island elsewhere [3-5]. As will be shown ahead, no mode numbers could be assigned to the secondary instability here reported. An example limiter plasma will be used, however the events here described

are all observed in similar plasmas with the following typical parameters: main gas Deuterium, plasma current $1.5\text{MA} \leq I_p \leq 1.95\text{MA}$, toroidal magnetic field $2.47\text{T} \leq B_\phi \leq 3\text{T}$, electron density $1.1 \times 10^{19} \text{ m}^{-3} \leq n_e \leq 2.15 \times 10^{19} \text{ m}^{-3}$, single null and limiter plasmas.

Electron Cyclotron Emission (ECE) radiometer measures the electron temperature in optically thick plasmas. With this diagnostic the time evolution of the magnetic island width as well as its radial position can be followed. The instability is detected, for islands widths larger than the spatial resolution of the diagnostic, through the characteristic perturbations it causes on the electron temperature profile. To use this diagnostic the electron density has to be below the ECE cut-off frequency, which was achieved with a N_e gas puff. Because of this β_N is low in these discharges (typically ≈ 0.45). The Joint European Torus (JET) ECE radiometer has 96 channels. Fast time acquisition is done on a sub sample of the full set of channels [7]. The evolution of the electron temperature profile during the precursor of a density limit disruption is shown in figure 1. Time resolution is $4\mu\text{s}$, and isothermals starting at 30eV increase in steps of 100eV . To each channel was applied a low pass finite impulse response filter with a cut off frequency of 10kHz to eliminate a high frequency component that hides the observations here addressed. The figure focus on the Low Field Side (LFS) part of the profile, spanning the region from the edge to $\approx q = 1$. The oscillation, starting with a high frequency and small amplitude at 3.62m and 23.572s and evolving to low frequency and large amplitude is the signature of the $2 = 1$ magnetic island on the LFS of the plasma. From cross-spectrum analysis the radial position of the $q = 2$ rational surface is found at $\approx 3.62\text{m}$ (see Fig 3). The frequency decreases nonlinearly from 2kHz up to $\approx 50\text{Hz}$, before the major disruption occurs at 23.637s . Because the island does not lock completely to the wall the radiometer can follow the degradation of the Te profile as the plasma slowly moves in front of the radiometer antenna during these events. In figure 1(a) four distinct events with large heat fluxes across the $q = 2$ initiate at $\approx 23.590\text{s}$, $\approx 23.599\text{s}$, $\approx 23.618\text{s}$ and $\approx 23.635\text{s}$, labeled A, B, C and D respectively. During these events the heat flux is directed to the plasma edge, as indicated by the increase in plasma edge temperature that follows. Edge temperature evolution also shows that heat lost during event A is smaller compared with the other three events.

One particular feature common to all these four events is that the sudden heat flux occurs at the same time a local oscillation secondary to the $2/1$ oscillation experiences an increase in amplitude. This secondary oscillation, to the magnetic island, will be called for simplicity from here on the Secondary Instability (SI). A closer observation shows that this SI is already present in the plasma before event A occurs. Due to low spatial coverage of the region around $q = 2$ surface by the fast ECE radiometer channels combined with higher noise level of the edge channels, was difficult to follow the SI with this diagnostic, during the $2/1$ mode fast rotating phase.

Both the $2/1$ magnetic island and SI can be followed also by magnetic coils. Figure 2(a) shows \dot{B}_θ signals from a toroidal array of coils [6] during the fast rotating phase of the magnetic island. Two different oscillations are observed. One with large increasing amplitude and decreasing frequency (from about 2kHz to 100Hz) and another smaller amplitude oscillation at frequencies above 2kHz . The gray lines connecting the minima, of the large amplitude oscillations, of the signals from

different coils show that the magnetic island has an toroidal mode number $n = 1$. The slope of the lines is proportional to the island average rotation frequency which decreases with time. The right most line indicates nonlinear change in toroidal rotation frequency within one complete turn of the island, with a decrease in frequency from 500Hz to 130Hz between 23.5855s and 23.5878s followed by a frequency increase to 390Hz between 23.5878s and 23.5888s. A similar exercise to find the toroidal mode number of the SI fails as neighbour coils do not always detect the same number of minima. Moreover the small amplitude oscillations from the SI are not seen over a complete period of the 2/1 mode oscillation. These two observations are consistent if the SI has no toroidal mode number.

Figure 2 (b) and (c) show \dot{B}_θ signals from a poloidal array of coils [6] during the fast rotating phase of the magnetic island. Coils IC1, IC2 and IC3 are located in the high led side (HFS) and the other 7 coils are on the LFS. This array allows us to draw similar conclusions as from the toroidal array, namely the $m = 2$ poloidal mode number of the magnetic island and no poloidal number for the SI. Up to ≈ 23.576 s the $m = n = 2 = 1$ oscillations in $\dot{B}_\theta(t)$ show a sinusoidal pattern. Afterwards, they are distorted by the presence of the SI. Note that coils, from the poloidal array, closer to the equatorial torus plane (P803-P805 and IC2) measure a larger distortion of the 2/1 signal as well as a larger amplitude of the SI.

As discussed previously the SI has no toroidal or poloidal mode number, and relatively to the 2/1 magnetic island this is consistent with the fact that SI is only observed at some parts of the 2/1 mode. During the fast rotating phase of the magnetic island (up to event A), the secondary oscillations are mostly observed at the island Off point. The amplitude of SI increases as the magnetic island frequency decreases. Exception to this is the period starting at 23.583s, where from coil T7 and progressing to coils T8, T9, T1, ..., T4, the secondary oscillations are observed continuously during one complete turn of the 2/1 mode around the torus. So in this period SI oscillations are seen at both the Off point and the X point of the 2/1 mode. This is also the period where, as described previously, the 2/1 mode experiences a pronounced nonlinear change in frequency (from 500Hz to 130Hz and then up to 390Hz). This behavior as been observed in all other similar discharges indicating that when the SI spans over the 2/1 tearing mode, this mode is dragged. Then follows event A where a moderate large heat flux across the $q = 2$ surface towards the plasma edge, is observed. At this stage the average rotation frequency of the island is 100 kHz and the SI develops in the magnetic island Off point (see Fig 1(a)).

Minor disruptions, events B, C and D, where larger heat fluxes across the $q = 2$ are observed, only occur when the 2/1 island rotation frequency is around 50Hz. At these stages, the heat flux to the edge experiences a significant increase when the SI develops a large amplitude at the magnetic island X point. Notice however that SI is only observed in half of the 2/1 island, namely from the time between the X point passes in front of the ECE radiometer (23.598s) till the Off point passes (23.604s). Then from this time, until the time the X point passes again (23.617s) the SI is not observed. Enhanced heat fluxes are only observed where the SI is located and when the SI oscillations are visible. In the part of the island not affected by SI, the electron temperature increases

indicating good energy confinement. So during the low rotation frequency phase, relatively to the island toroidal velocity, in the upstream direction, experimental data clearly indicates that, in one part of the island (between the X and Off points) the SI degrades energy confinement, while at the other part of the island (between the Off and X points) without SI, confinement is not affected as shown by the T_e increase in the region between the low q side of the island separatrix and $\approx q = 1$.

From figure 1 one can gain some insight about the radial location of the SI. The location of the 2/1 magnetic island separatrix is not precisely known. However during the slow rotating phase of the 2/1 island the SI is apparently located in the vicinity of the low q side of the separatrix. This is supported by the lack of secondary oscillations on T_e at the high q side of the separatrix during minor disruptions (event B, C and D). During the fast rotation phase the SI oscillations are found at the high q side of the separatrix (e.g. at 23.585s and at 23.590s). However this can be due to the smaller island width at this time. The perturbations the 2/1 island leaves on T_e and \dot{B}_θ should share similar frequency spectrum. Since radial position of \tilde{T}_e is known, position of \dot{B}_θ perturbations linearly dependent with \tilde{T}_e can be inferred from the coherence function,

$$\gamma^2(f) = \frac{|S_{T_e \dot{B}_\theta}(f)|^2}{S_{T_e T_e}(f) S_{\dot{B}_\theta \dot{B}_\theta}(f)}$$

where S is the cross-spectrum between T_e and \dot{B}_θ , and $0 \leq \gamma^2(f) \leq 1$. Coherence between the T_e signal measured by channel 12 of the ECE radiometer (the closest channel to the $q = 2$ surface) and \dot{B}_θ signal measured by coil T1 is shown on Figure 1(b). This two signals have high coherence between 23.57s and 23.58s with frequency varying from 2kHz to 500Hz, which corresponds to the first 10ms of growth of the 2/1 mode. Around 23.575s high coherence is also observed for frequencies between 4 and 6kHz. Closer inspection of the B_θ signal, shows that the frequency of the SI oscillations at this time is also in the same range. So this spot of high coherence between the two signals can be attributed to the SI. The two signals will only show high coherence again at the major disruption.

High coherence values, $\gamma^2 > 0.9$, between the signals of several ECE channels and the signal from T1 coil is represented in Figure 3. It is observed for ECE channels from 13 to 18, high coherence with the B_θ signal of coil T1 at the minor disruptions (events B and C). The magnetic island at this times is rotating at very low frequencies (≈ 50 Hz), so the high coherence values occurring are most probably due to the higher frequency oscillations of the SI. The other channels (19, 20... up to plasma core and 12, 6... up to the edge) do not have high coherence with \dot{B}_θ from coil T1. This corroborates Fig. 1(a), where the SI is seen in the region close to the low q side magnetic island separatrix during the minor disruptions (B, C and D). The SI during event A shows similar features with a predisruptive instability observed in RTP, a tokamak with a minor radius one order of magnitude smaller than JET (see arrow A in figures 2 and 4 of [8]). Also in RTP once the disturbance of T_e caused by the instability is observed, the sinusoidal \dot{B}_θ signal became distorted. The time scales differ quite a lot between the two tokamaks and very likely in JET, with longer time scales, the SI here described is the same instability observed in RTP, but seen in more detail and during a longer period. If that

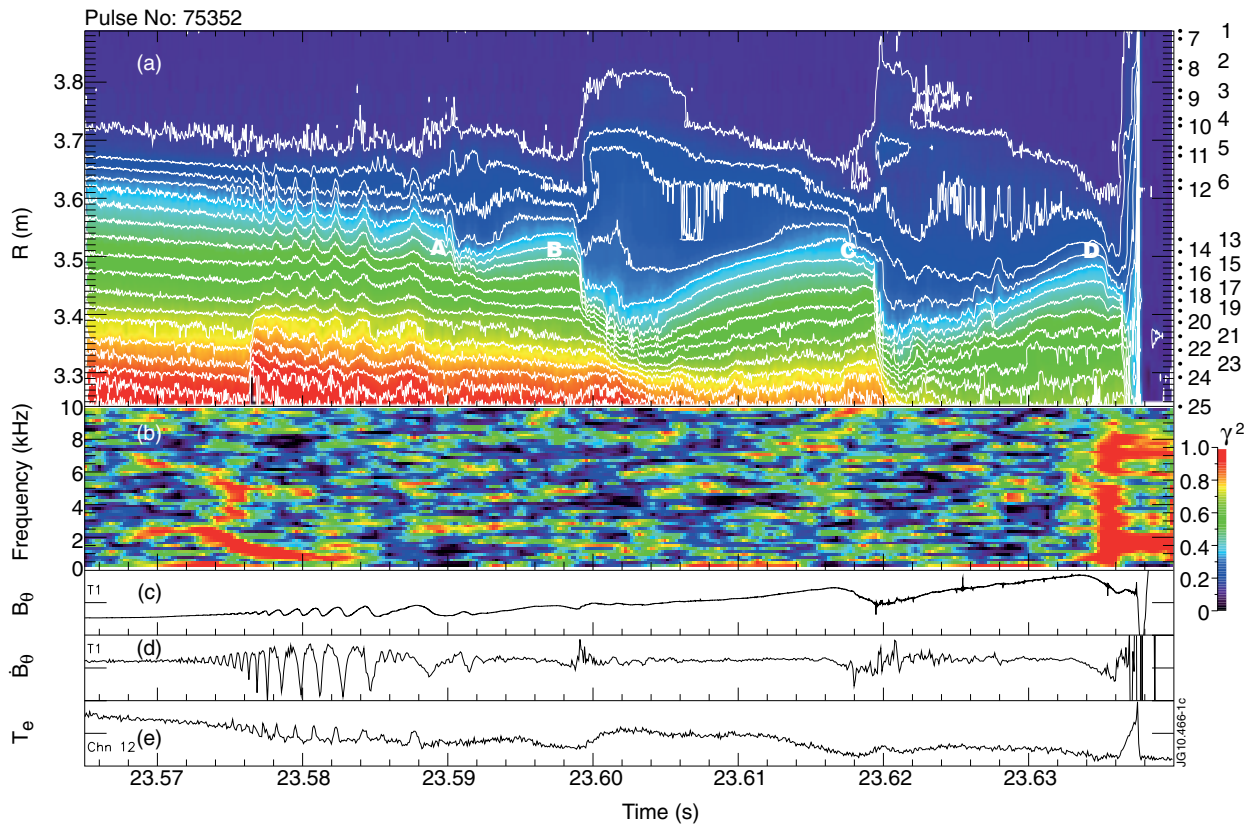
proves to be the case, the SI is not simply a machine dependent instability but a universal one that will certainly be seen in other tokamaks and in ITER.

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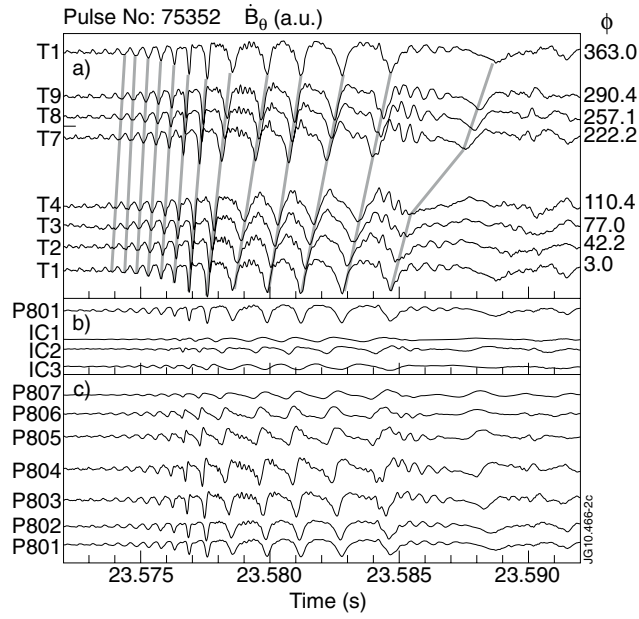


Figure 2: (a) Toroidal array of $\dot{B}_\theta(t)$. (b) Poloidal array of $\dot{B}_\theta(t)$, inner wall and limiter coils.

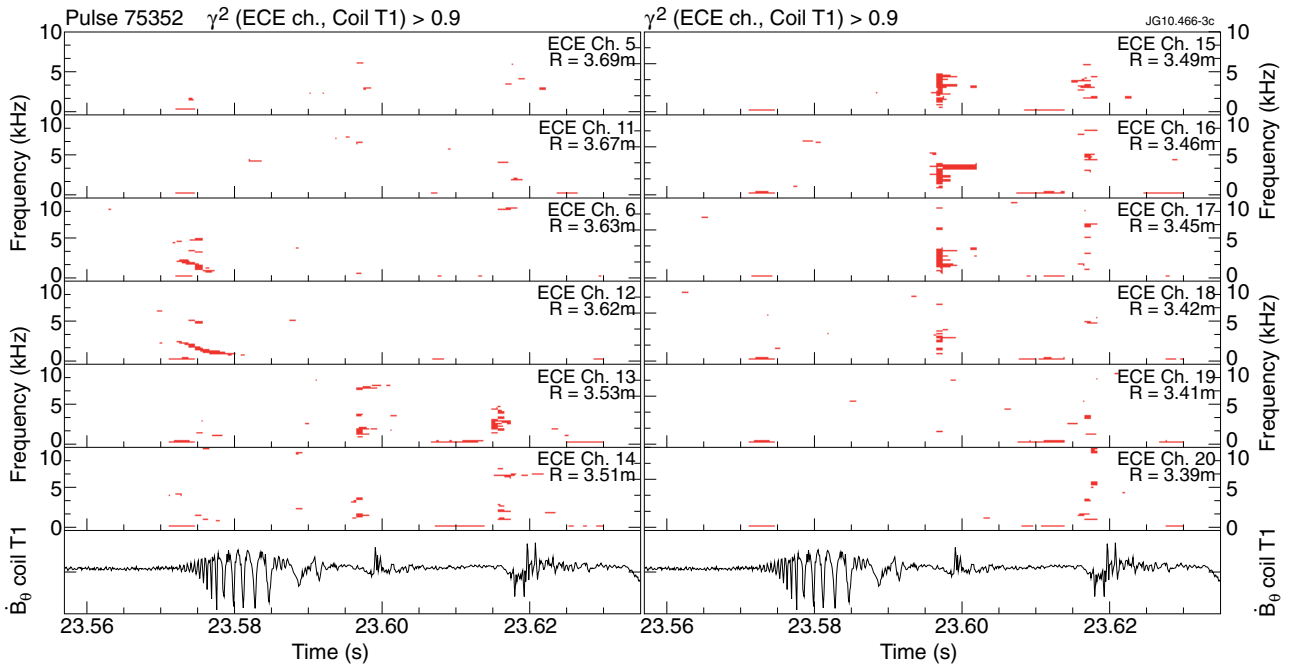


Figure 3: (a) Coherence between T_e and $\dot{B}_\theta(t)$ for the indicated radiometer channels. For reference $\dot{B}_\theta(t)$ is shown at the bottom of each column.