

Characterization of SuperNEMO demonstrator calorimeter timing performance Study of ^{208}Tl background rejection influence on the $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay sensitivity

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Contents

Contents	3
1 Phenomenology of particle physics	9
1.1 The Standard Model of particle physics	9
1.1.1 Bosons	9
1.1.2 Fermions	9
1.1.3 $2\nu\beta\beta$ decay	9
1.1.4 Where the Standard Model ends	9
1.2 Going beyond the Standard Model with neutrinos	9
1.2.1 Neutrino flavors and oscillations	9
1.2.2 Neutrino masses and nature	9
1.2.3 Neutrinoless double beta decay	9
1.2.4 Other searches beyond the Standard Model with neutrinos	9
1.3 $0\nu\beta\beta$ experiment status	9
1.3.1 Experimental design criteria	9
1.3.2 $0\nu\beta\beta$ direct search experiments	11
1.3.3 Bolometers	12
1.3.4 Time projection chambers	12
1.3.5 Scintillators	13
1.3.6 Tracking calorimeters	15
2 The SuperNEMO demonstrator	17
2.1 The SuperNEMO technology	17
2.1.1 Detection principle	18
2.1.2 The source foils	20
2.1.3 The tracker	23
2.1.4 The calorimeter	26
2.1.5 The magnetic coil and the shieldings	30
2.1.6 Calibration strategy	33
2.1.7 Detector cabling	36
2.1.8 Electronics	36
2.1.9 Detector gas tightness	39

2.2	Backgrounds	41
2.2.1	Internal background	41
2.2.2	External background	43
2.2.3	Radon background	45
2.2.4	Background reduction	45
2.3	The SuperNEMO software	46
2.3.1	Simulation	46
2.3.2	Reconstruction pipeline	47
2.3.3	Analysis tools	48
2.4	Conclusion	51
3	Sensitivity of the SuperNEMO demonstrator to the $0\nu\beta\beta$	53
3.1	The $0\nu\beta\beta$ signal and background model	53
3.1.1	The $0\nu\beta\beta$ signal	54
3.1.2	Inside detector backgrounds	54
3.1.3	External backgrounds	55
3.1.4	Expected number of decays	56
3.2	Event selection	57
3.2.1	Electron definition	57
3.2.2	Total energy spectrum	57
3.3	Demonstrator sensitivity to the $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay of ^{82}Se	59
3.3.1	Sensitivity to the $0\nu\beta\beta$ half-life	59
3.3.2	Limit on the effective neutrino mass	62
3.4	Impact of sources contamination levels on the sensitivity	63
3.4.1	Contamination levels	63
3.4.2	Optimisation of event selection	66
3.5	Impact of the magnetic field on the sensitivity	72
3.5.1	Simulations of the magnetic field inside the demonstrator and reconstructed track fit	72
3.5.2	Impact of the magnetic field on signal and background selections	73
3.5.3	Influence of the magnetic field on optical modules and reconstruction efficiency	75
3.5.4	Simulations with a non-uniform magnetic field	76
3.6	Searching for the Neodymium-150 $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay	78
3.6.1	Searching for the $0\nu\beta\beta$ of other isotopes	78
3.6.2	Sensitivity to the $0\nu\beta\beta$ of ^{150}Nd	78
3.7	The final detector sensitivity	80
3.8	Conclusion	81
4	Improvement of the internal Thallium-208 background rejection	85
4.1	Motivations	85
4.2	The internal ^{208}Tl background	86
4.2.1	The internal conversion process	87
4.2.2	Selection of ^{208}Tl disintegrations in the 2e channel	88
4.3	Rejection of ^{208}Tl with a time-of-flight criterion	89
4.3.1	The internal probability	89

4.3.2	The exponential probability for ^{208}Tl events	91
4.4	Event selection	93
4.4.1	Energy selection	94
4.4.2	Time-of-flight cut-off	94
4.4.3	Probability cut-off	95
4.4.4	Selection optimisation	99
4.5	Impact of ^{208}Tl rejection on the experiment's sensitivity	99
4.5.1	Influence of the calorimeter time resolution	99
4.6	Conclusions	101
5	Characterisation of the calorimeter time resolution	103
5.1	Interaction of particles in the SuperNEMO scintillators	104
5.1.1	Interaction of electrons	104
5.1.2	Interaction of photons	104
5.2	Measurement of the time resolution with a ^{60}Co source	105
5.2.1	Description of Cobalt 60 nucleus	106
5.2.2	Time response of optical modules	106
5.2.3	Final experimental design	109
5.2.4	Signal events selection	111
5.2.5	Background estimation	113
5.2.6	Detector efficiency	117
5.2.7	Determination of the individual timing resolution of each optical module	117
5.2.8	Conclusion	122
5.3	The Light Injection System	122
5.3.1	Light injection system commissioning	122
5.3.2	Time resolution of optical modules	122
6	Detector commissioning	125
6.1	Reflectometry analysis	125
6.1.1	Goal of the reflectometry analysis	125
6.1.2	Pulse timing: controlling cable lengths	126
6.1.3	Signal attenuation	130
6.1.4	Pulse shape analysis	132
6.1.5	Comparison with ^{60}Co	133
6.1.6	Conclusion	133
6.2	Calibrating the electronic boards	133
6.2.1	Principle	133
6.2.2	Measuring the time offset of front end boards	133
6.2.3	Results	133
6.3	Energy calibration of optical modules	133
6.4	Baseline studies	133
6.5	Light Injection System	133
	Conclusion	135
	Bibliography	137

Introduction

It is always interesting to take a historical approach when talking about a scientific discovery. This allows us to put into perspective knowledge that is now considered to have been acquired.

The Standard Model of Elementary Particle Physics attempts to describe the world around us on scales that were inconceivable two centuries ago. A little over a hundred years ago, Henri Becquerel discovered what we today call radioactivity, with the observation of beta decay. This historical discovery was nevertheless accompanied by profound questioning, since the beta particle emitted during this decay, which turned out to be an electron, only carries away part of the available energy. This observation was contrary to the first principle of thermodynamics on the conservation of energy, and some scientists postulated that this fundamental law was being violated. It took 35 years for an eminent scientist by the name of Wolfgang Pauli to propose the existence of the *neutrino* - for small neutron in Italian - as a solution to the problem of missing energy. Three years later Enrico Fermi laid the foundations for the first mathematical formulation of what is today the Lagrangian of weak interaction. It was another 25 years, 60 years after the discovery of beta radioactivity, before the neutrino was experimentally observed by Clyde Cowan and Frederick Reines. The neutrino adventure had only just begun.

Why is this particle, although abundantly produced in the sun, so difficult to detect? It is because it interacts very little with the matter - electrons and quarks - that constitutes us, being sensitive only to the weak interaction (of short range), and to the gravitational force (very weakly since the mass of the neutrino is extremely low, so much so that it was believed massless for a long time).

In the current model of particle physics, neutrinos are actually described as massless. It was Bruno Pontecorvo who proposed in 1957 that neutrinos could oscillate between their different mass states, based on the already known model of oscillation of neutral kaons. To be valid, this model then presupposed that neutrinos had a non-zero mass. It was the SuperKamiokande experiment that first observed this phenomenon in 1998, demonstrating that at least two of the three neutrino flavours have a non-zero mass. The Standard Model of particle physics is then no longer sufficient to describe the neutrino, making this particle a pathway to physics beyond the Standard Model.

It now remains to be discovered how this particle acquires its mass. Indeed,

having a neutral charge under the three fundamental interactions described by the Standard Model, two mass generation mechanisms are foreseeable. The first is to assume that, like all other fermions, the neutrino obtains its mass through the Higgs mechanism, leading irremediably to the assumption of the existence of a sterile neutrino. The second, proposed by Ettore Majorana, assumes that the neutrino is its own antiparticle. If this assertion is the one that applies to neutrinos, then a disintegration, prohibited by the Standard Model, is possible. It is called *neutrinoless double beta decay* ($0\nu\beta\beta$), to contrast with the *two neutrinos double beta decay* ($2\nu\beta\beta$) allowed by the Standard Model and already observed for several isotopes. In this disintegration, two simple beta decays take place simultaneously in the same nucleus, in which the two neutrinos are absorbed, allowing the total energy of the reaction to be distributed between the two exiting electrons. For reasons that are detailed in the first chapter of this manuscript, which deals with the phenomenology of the neutrino, this disintegration is only possible if the neutrino is a Majorana particle.

Several experiments, also described in the first chapter, are dedicated to the search for this disintegration which, if it exists, is extremely rare. The SuperNEMO experiment, on which I conducted my thesis, is one of them. Successor of the NEMO experiments, it uses a unique combination of technologies, described in detail in the second chapter, allowing to trace the path of the electrons resulting from double beta disintegrations -with a wire chamber-, and also to measure their energies - with a segmented electromagnetic calorimeter.

These experiments differ from one another in the technology they use, and also in the sensitivity they can achieve in the search for this decay. Within the framework of this thesis, I carried out, together with another PhD student on SuperNEMO, a sensitivity study of this experiment presented in the third chapter, determining the influence that several characteristics of the detector can have on it.

All these experiments are designed to observe, should this process exist, an extremely rare physical event. They are thus constrained to focus on the background which may disturb the measurement and have a non-negligible impact on their sensitivity to this disintegration. In this perspective, the fourth chapter presents a new technique to identify the events resulting from one of the main background for this experiment, which is the natural disintegration of an isotope from the uranium 238 decay chain, found in the detector's components. To effectively reject this background, I also study the impact on the sensitivity of the accuracy with which we measure the arrival time of particles in the calorimeter. To complete this theoretical analysis based on simulations of the detector, the fifth chapter gives an overview of the data taken at Modane with the SuperNEMO calorimeter and of the analysis aiming to characterise the time resolution for a large part of the calorimeter optical modules.

When I joined the LAL team at Orsay (now IJCLab) as a PhD student, SuperNEMO was already largely built in the Modane underground laboratory. I had the opportunity to actively participate in the completion of its assembly, as well as in the analyses of the first commissioning data described in the last chapter, thus completing the experimental knowledge acquired during this thesis.



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