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Self-Similar Colloidal Antennas for Cascaded Field Enhancement

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We experimentally demonstrate cascaded field enhancement by means of gold nanoparticle dimer and trimer antennas. The local field enhancement is probed by single molecule fluorescence using fluorophores with high intrinsic quantum efficiency ($Q^o > 80\%$). Using a self-similar trimer antenna consisting of an 80 nm, 40 nm, and 20 nm gold nanoparticle, we demonstrate a fluorescence enhancement of 40 and a spatial confinement of 15 nm. Compared to a single gold nanoparticle, the self-similar trimer antenna improves the enhancement-confinement ratio by more than an order of magnitude. Self-similar antennas hold promise for high-resolution imaging and spectroscopy, ultrasensitive detection and efficient single photon sources.

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The unique optical properties of noble metal nanoparticles are used in a wide range of applications, ranging from photovoltaics [1, 2] and lasing [3, 4] to biosensing [5] and cancer therapy [6]. These applications make use of the strongly enhanced local fields associated with the excitation of localized surface plasmon resonances. Noble metal nanoparticles have also been studied as prototype optical antennas [7] for enhancing the photon emission from single quantum emitters, such as single molecules, quantum dots, and ions [8–10]. These studies have shown that the enhancement of spontaneous emission (fluorescence) depends both on the excitation rate $\Gamma_{\text{exc}}$ and the quantum yield $Q$ of the quantum emitter.

For weak excitation fields (perturbation limit) the fluorescence rate $\Gamma_{\text{em}}$ of a quantum emitter can be represented as

$$\Gamma_{\text{em}} = \Gamma_{\text{exc}} Q.$$  

Accordingly, the fluorescence rate can be increased by enhancing either $\Gamma_{\text{exc}}$ or $Q$. Since efficient emitters have an intrinsic quantum yield of $Q^o \sim 1$, the emission rate can only be increased by enhancing the excitation rate $\Gamma_{\text{exc}}$. On the other hand, for poor emitters ($Q^o \ll 1$) we can increase $\Gamma_{\text{em}}$ by enhancing both $Q$ and $\Gamma_{\text{exc}}$. Several studies have already demonstrated that the fluorescence enhancement depends strongly on the intrinsic quantum efficiency $Q^o$ [10–13]. High-$Q^o$ emitters yield low fluorescence enhancements while low-$Q^o$ emitters show strong fluorescence enhancements. For example, using a single 80 nm gold nanoparticle coupled to a quantum emitter one measures a fluorescence enhancement of $8 \sim 10$ for high-$Q^o$ emitters [8, 9] and $> 80$ for low-$Q^o$ emitters such as yttrium ion metallofullerenes [10].

In general, the smaller the nanoparticle is, the lower the fluorescence enhancement will be. This can be understood by considering the nanoparticle’s quasi-static polarizability $\alpha(\omega)$. The energy radiated by the emitter is related to the scattering cross-section

$$\sigma_{\text{scatt}} = \frac{k^4}{6\pi^2} |\alpha(\omega)|^2,$$  

where $k = \sqrt{\varepsilon_0 \omega/c}$ is the wavevector of the surrounding medium. On the other hand, the energy dissipated by the nanoparticle is derived from the absorption cross-section

$$\sigma_{\text{abs}} = \frac{k}{\varepsilon_0} \text{Im}|\alpha(\omega)|.$$  

Because $\alpha \propto R^3$, $R$ being the particle radius, the scattering cross-section scales with $R^6$ whereas the absorption cross-section depends on $R^3$. Therefore, absorption dominates over scattering for small particles. Thus, a strong fluorescence enhancement requires a large nanoparticle size which, on the other hand, provides poor localization [13–15]. Consequently, strong enhancement and high localization appear to be contradictory requirements. Here, we show that we can significantly boost the enhancement-localization ratio by using self-similar antennas consisting of coupled gold nanoparticles of decreasing size. For a trimer antenna consisting of an 80 nm, 40 nm, and 20 nm nanoparticle we achieve a fluorescence enhancement of $\sim 40$ and a localization of $\sim 15$ nm. Compared to a single gold nanoparticle, the trimer antenna improves the enhancement-localization ratio by more than an order of magnitude.

The cascaded field enhancement by a self-similar chain of nanoparticles has been first proposed by Stockman and co-workers [16, 17]. In this scheme, the radii of the particles in the chain scale as $R_{n+1} = \kappa R_n$ and the interparticle separations as $d_{n+1,n+2} = \kappa d_{n,n+1}$ with $\kappa$ denoting a constant scaling factor and $n$ the particle number. This geometry provides a multiplicative cascade effect: the largest particle enhances the incident field by a factor of $f$, the enhanced field then excites the next smaller particle which in turn enhances the field by another factor of $f$, and so on. This sequence
leads to a concentration of light at the smallest particle in the chain. Self-similar structures have been recently fabricated using both self-assembly techniques and top-down nanofabrication [18–20]. Kravets et al. have observed cascaded field enhancement in arrays of two and three gold nanodiscs fabricated by electron beam lithography [20]. However, there is no experimental demonstration of cascaded field enhancement for a single chain of self-similar colloidal nanoparticles.

In this letter we experimentally demonstrate cascaded field enhancement with gold nanoparticles assembled into dimer and trimer antennas. Single molecules are used to probe the local field enhancement. The experimental configuration is illustrated in Fig. 1(a). A radially polarized laser beam ($\lambda = 633\,\text{nm}$) is focused by means of a NA=1.4 objective on the surface of a glass sample that supports randomly distributed nile blue molecules ($Q^c > 80\%$) embedded in a $2 - 5\,\text{nm}$ PMMA layer. A self-similar nanoparticle antenna consisting of a chain of gold nanoparticles of decreasing size is supported by a pointed quartz pipette and positioned into the center of the laser focus. The longitudinal field in the focus of the radially polarized beam excites the antenna and the enhanced antenna field locally interacts with individual molecules on the sample surface. The antenna-sample separation can be controlled with Angstrom accuracy by means of a normal-force feedback loop. Fluorescence photons from single molecules are collected with the same objective and recorded with an avalanche photodiode while raster-scanning the sample underneath the optical antenna or varying the antenna-sample distance. Dimer and trimer antennas are fabricated by sequential bottom-up assembly. Briefly, gold nanoparticles are dispersed on a clean glass substrate. An amino-silane functionalized quartz tip is first used to map out the distribution of the gold particles on the substrate and is then centered over a selected particle. Upon mechanical contact between gold particle and the functionalized tip, the particle attaches to the tip and can be lifted off the surface. Using 1,6 hexane dithiol linker molecules, the attachment principle can be sequentially repeated to form dimers, trimers, tetramers, or higher multi-particle antennas. The finite size of the linker molecules assures that there is no electrical contact between individual particles [21]. Fig. 1(b) depicts a scanning electron micrograph of a typical self-similar trimer antenna fabricated following the procedure described above.

In a first step, we have compared a dimer antenna made of an $80\,\text{nm}$ and a $40\,\text{nm}$ gold nanoparticle with a single $40\,\text{nm}$ gold nanoparticle antenna. The field localization of both antennas is defined by the $40\,\text{nm}$ particle but the local field is expected to be larger for the $80 - 40\,\text{nm}$ dimer antenna because of cascaded field enhancement. Fig. 2(a) shows a high-resolution fluorescence image of the single molecule sample recorded with the $80 - 40\,\text{nm}$ dimer antenna. Individual molecules can be clearly identified. The resolution is $\sim 25\,\text{nm}$ and the fluorescence enhancement is $\sim 20$. The same sample has been re-imaged with a single $40\,\text{nm}$ nanoparticle antenna. In accordance with theoretical predictions, similar signal confinement is observed but the fluorescence enhancement is more than four times weaker [21].

Fig. 2(b) depicts the single molecule emission spectrum in the presence (top curve) and absence of the $80-40\,\text{nm}$ dimer antenna. A fluorescence enhancement of $\sim 20$ can be inferred from the two spectra. The shape of the spectrum remains largely unaffected by the presence of the dimer antenna [21]. The dimer antenna yields a significantly higher fluorescence enhancement, underscoring the concept of cascaded field enhancement. While the large particle primarily interacts with the radiation field, the smaller particle provides the desired field localization.

Next, we add an additional $20\,\text{nm}$ gold nanoparticle to the dimer. The resulting trimer antenna consists of a chain of an $80\,\text{nm}$, $40\,\text{nm}$, and $20\,\text{nm}$ nanoparticle. Note that the interparticle separation is kept constant at a distance of $2\,\text{nm}$ by means of the di-thiol linker molecules [21]. The latter ensures that quantum size effects (e.g. screening and electron tunneling) are negligible [22]. Hence, charge transfer between individual spheres is inhibited for these structures. Theoretical studies have shown that the interaction between the nanoparticles leads to a red-shift of the plasmon resonance [23]. In accordance, we find that the resonance of the $80 - 40 - 20\,\text{nm}$ trimer antenna is red-shifted from the plasmon resonance of an isolated spherical...
FIG. 2: Excitation of single molecule fluorescence with a dimer antenna consisting of an 80 nm and a 40 nm gold nanoparticle. (a) Fluorescence image of the single molecule sample. A line-cut through the marked fluorescence spot indicates an optical confinement of 23 nm. The inset is an SEM image of the dimer antenna. (b) Single molecule emission spectrum with (upper curve) and without the dimer antenna (lower curve), revealing a fluorescence enhancement of \( \sim 20 \). Compared to a single 40 nm particle, the 80–40 nm dimer antenna provides a four-fold stronger fluorescence enhancement.

Gold particle (c.f. Fig. 3b). The resonance is found to be at \( \lambda = 590 \text{ nm} \) whereas the resonance of a single gold particle is at \( \lambda = 530 \text{ nm} \). Note that if the nanoparticles were in conductive contact the resulting plasmon resonance would shift into the near-infrared frequency regime (charge-transfer plasmon [24]). The separation of \( \sim 2 \text{ nm} \) ensures that the plasmon resonance remains in the visible, which is a requirement for the single molecule fluorescence experiments.

Fig. 3(a) renders the calculated field distribution near the trimer antenna for an on-axis excitation with a focused radially-polarized beam. The calculation is based on the multiple-multipole (MMP) method [25]. The figure shows contours of constant \( |E|^2 \) using a logarithmic scaling (factor of two between contour lines). The MMP calculation confirms the expected cascaded field enhancement, i.e. the field strength increases from the largest to the smallest particle. The intensity is highest in the gap between the two smaller particles, in agreement with the predictions by Li et al. [16], but the field is also significantly enhanced at the apex of the smallest particle. At the same time, the smallest particle provides sub-20 nanometer field localization. Similar calculations have been performed with a dipole source placed in front of the smallest particle and pointing along the particle chain. The resulting radiation pattern (data not shown) closely resembles that of a dipole source, suggesting incident radiation is mainly mediated by the largest particle in the chain.

Following the outlined theoretical considerations we have performed single molecule fluorescence experiments using 80–40–20 nm gold nanoparticle trimer antennas, similar to the one shown in Fig. 1(b). A fluorescence map of the single molecule sample is shown in Fig. 4(a). Line-cuts through individual fluorescence spots yield a resolution of 15 nm, as seen in the inset. This resolution is expected on the basis of the smallest particle size. In general, we observe that the resolution (signal confinement) is slightly better than the true particle size. An 80 nm particle yields a resolution of \( \sim 60 \text{ nm} \), a 40 nm particle a resolution of 25 nm, and a 20 nm particle a resolution of 15 nm. Resolution is better than the particle size because of the curvature of the particle surface and the particular field distribution. Finally, to demonstrate the strong localization of fields along the \( z \)-direction at the apex of the trimer, we recorded a fluorescence approach curve as shown in Fig. 4(b). The sharp increase in signal over the last 15 nm conclusively proves that the localization arises due to the foremost 20 nm diameter particle.

The maximum fluorescence enhancement for the trimer antenna is \( \sim 40 \), an improvement over the dimer antenna. Note, however, that the measured fluorescence not only depends on the local field enhancement but also on the quantum yield (c.f. Eq. 1). Because the nonradiative decay rate is higher for molecules near small nanoparticles [14], fluorescence quenching is more severe for the trimer antenna than for the dimer antenna. Thus, single molecule fluorescence measurements provide a very conservative estimate of the local field enhancement. Compared to a single
80 nm nanoparticle, the trimer antenna improves the enhancement-localization ratio by a factor of 15, and compared to a 20 nm nanoparticle the improvement is almost a factor of 30. Finally, it should be noted that the highest enhancements are seen for vertically oriented molecules, while in-plane oriented molecules yield a factor ~3 lower fluorescence enhancement.

In conclusion, we have experimentally demonstrated cascaded field enhancement using self-similar antennas made of colloidal gold nanoparticles. For an 80 – 40 – 20 nm trimer antenna we obtain a localization of 15 nm and a fluorescence enhancement of 40 for molecules with high intrinsic quantum yield efficiency ($Q^0 \sim 0.8$). We have shown that the largest particle is responsible for the interaction with the radiation field while the smallest particle is responsible for field localization. The high enhancement-localization ratio achieved with the self-similar antenna geometry improves the resolution in fluorescence imaging and provides high detection sensitivity. Self-similar antennas also hold promise for high-efficiency single photon sources and ultralow-noise photodetectors.

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