

VOLTAGE COEFFICIENT OF RESISTANCE APPLICATION NOTE

Application note # 1

The purpose of this application note is to describe some important considerations in high voltage pulse measurements with resistors as dividing elements. The term "**Voltage Coefficient of Resistance**" has been around for a long time¹; but is seldom used or well understood. As high voltage pulse measurements improve, and higher accuracy becomes available, voltage coefficient errors that could once be ignored now must be considered.

It is well known that the resistance increases with temperature rise of nearly all resistors, including the commonly encountered carbon composition resistor. The temperature **coefficient of resistance** (of a resistor) may be expressed as the ratio of the resistance change to the temperature rise. Such a temperature coefficient classification is useful if the resistance changes uniformly with temperature rise and fall.

Resistors undergo temperature variations not only due to changes in ambient temperature, but also due to dissipation of electrical energy when current is passed through them. It is desirable in measurements using resistors, that their temperature coefficient be small to minimize errors. One can see, for example, that when a measurement apparatus involving resistors is calibrated at low signal levels, the calibration may be invalid at higher signal levels if the resistance values change.

It has also been known for a long time¹ that the resistance of a resistor can change due to a change in the voltage applied to it, even though the temperature may be held constant. The **voltage coefficient of resistance** may be expressed as the ratio of the resistance change in ohms to the corresponding increase in applied voltage in volts when the temperature is held constant. Such voltage coefficient of resistance definition is useful to characterize the resistance change with an increase in applied voltage. Of course, for any useful resistor material, the resistance returns to its original value when the applied voltage is removed.

When a steady voltage is applied to a resistor, it normally undergoes resistance changes due to both applied voltage and temperature increase. The temperature increase is caused by the dissipation of electrical energy in the resistor due to current flow. At low voltages the temperature coefficient is usually larger than the voltage coefficient. This change in resistance is almost entirely due to a temperature change in the resistor.

When a short pulse is applied to a resistor, and very little average power is dissipated in the resistor, its temperature will not rise appreciably. Most of the resistance change of a low temperature coefficient resistor will be due mainly to the application of voltage, and limited to the time when the voltage is applied. When high voltage pulses are applied to low value resistors, the change in resistance can be appreciable, and can be very important in measurement applications.

Measurement of short high voltage pulses are made in investigations of the effects of lightning strikes, EMP testing on electrical equipment, instrumenting underground nuclear tests, and the pulse power industry.

Most resistors have a negative voltage coefficient, which means that at higher voltages, the resistance decreases during the pulse. If the resistance increases with voltage, the resistor has a

positive voltage coefficient. This voltage dependent change of resistance happens instantaneously and can be observed to occur in less than 1 nanosecond. If the period of voltage application is too long, the temperature may rise and cause large resistance changes that can mask voltage coefficient effects.

Short pulses applied to many resistors will show voltage coefficient effects during the time the voltage is applied. Although a resistor may not burn out during extensive pulsing, or have a permanent resistance change, it can have significant voltage coefficient changes during the time of the pulse.

The voltage coefficient varies with different resistive materials, and seems to be greatest for materials that are composed of a granular conglomeration of resistive material held together with an insulating binder. Carbon composition and cermet film resistors use these types of resistive materials.

Nonlinear resistivity can easily be displayed by placing a small amount of finely powdered conducting or semiconducting material between two skewed small diameter wires. Graphite, shaved from a pencil or from a carbon composition resistor displays this effect nicely. The effect can be observed using as little as 1 volt between the two wires. The nonlinear voltage versus current ratio can easily be seen on a simple transistor/ diode curve tracer as a nonlinear slope. This nonlinear resistance occurs for both positive and negative voltages and is symmetrical if there is no rectifying contact. Of course, resistors of a few thousandths of an inch in length are not used in high voltage applications; but if you put 1,000 of these small resistors mentioned above, that are three thousandths of an inch long, in series, you would have a resistor three inches long. This resistor, assembled from many low voltage nonlinear junctions, would have a nonlinear resistance when used at 1,000 volts.

The voltage coefficient of resistance of the resistor depends not only upon the length of the resistor, but also upon the conductive interfaces between the resistive particles that make up the resistor. These interfaces result in emission current (tunneling) across microscopic gaps between conductive particles such as graphite. It is complicated by many factors such as size of particles, their size distribution, and electron emission coefficients. If resistance can be obtained without resorting to high resistance contacts between granular low resistivity materials, then low voltage coefficients can be achieved.

Bulk metal resistors have almost unmeasurable voltage coefficients. However, due to the low resistivity of metals, wire wound resistors must be used to achieve reasonable resistance values. The combined inductance and capacitance effects of wire wound resistors prevent their use either at high frequencies or with fast pulses.

Thin metal film can also be used to achieve reasonable resistance values, but these resistors have a high voltage coefficient. This may result from the extremely thin metal film deposited on a very rough ceramic substrate, that allows tunneling or current flow across the ceramic valleys.

Carbon composition resistors are made with powdered or granular graphite material, which has a relatively low bulk resistivity.

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Application note # 1 continued

Many different resistivity compositions are made to cover the 10 ohm to 10 megohm resistor range. The graphite/insulator compositions are held in place with a phenolic binder that also anchors the wire terminals into the carbon resistance element. This is the original construction method for carbon composition resistors and creates a robust and inexpensive resistor.

Ordinary carbon composition resistors normally are made in 1/4, 1/2, 1, and 2 watt sizes. Our measurements found the 2 watt size to have a much higher voltage coefficient than the 1 watt size, and the 1/2 watt size to have the lowest voltage coefficient over all. It was also found that the voltage coefficient of any particular wattage rating is not much different between manufacturers. This would lead us to believe that something in the basic manufacturing process of this type of resistor may be responsible for its very high voltage coefficient.

In order to increase the surface area of a carbon composition resistor and allow it to dissipate more energy, the size of the resistor is increased. Increasing the size of the resistor will usually decrease its resistance unless one increases the resistivity of the bulk material to compensate for the increase in cross sectional area. For example a typical 1/2 watt resistor,² has a length of 0.375 inch and a diameter of 0.140 inch. The typical 2 watt resistor has a length of 0.688 inch and a diameter of 0.318 inch. The length has been increased by a factor of 1.8, and the diameter by a factor of 2.27, so that the cross sectional area has increased by a factor of 5.2. The resistance of a cylindrical resistor would be $R = r I/A$, where r is the resistivity of the bulk material, I is the length, and A is the cross sectional area. The resistance would be increased by a factor of 1.8 due to the longer length, and decreased by a factor of 5.2 due to the larger cross sectional area. This example assumes parallel end terminals, although commercial carbon composition resistors have very non-uniform end terminals.

In order to maintain the same resistance, in going from 1/2 watt size to the 2 watt size, the resistivity of the bulk material must be increased by a factor of 2.9. The resistivity depends upon the ratio of graphite particles (and their size distribution) to the insulating binder material. A higher resistivity is achieved by decreasing this ratio, using more binder or less graphite in the mixture. Therefore, the resistance material of a 2 watt resistor has a smaller percentage of graphite, than a 1/2 watt resistor with the same value. Fewer contacts between granular resistor particles results in more tunneling, causing a higher voltage coefficient.

The mechanism that causes resistors to change value with the application of voltage is difficult to define with certainty. However, the evidence for such a change is real, and substantial changes in resistance can be observed. In one of our tests, the resistance of a 2 watt carbon composition resistor was observed to decrease from 390 ohms to 200 ohms during pulse testing. The high voltage resistance was approximately 51% of the resistance at low voltage during application of a 2kv, 100ns wide pulse. In pulse tests at 3kV with the same value resistors, a 1 watt resistor decreased approximately 15%, and a 1/2 watt resistor decreased approximately 6%.*

An additional factor that probably contributes to a decrease in resistance upon the application of high voltage is the effect of the swaged tinned metal contacts of these resistors. They protrude into the bulk resistive material in such a way as to cause non-uniform current distribution at both ends of the resistor.

In high voltage pulse testing, inaccurate results are obtained when high voltage coefficient resistors are used for voltage division or attenuation measurements. The measurement of voltage coefficient of resistance can be accomplished at audio and radio frequencies by measuring the production of harmonic signals due to resistor nonlinear behavior³. We have developed additional measurement methods using voltage pulses, and will continue resistor and attenuator testing.

We hope this information helps provide a better understanding of voltage coefficient and the causes of resistance changes at high voltage. Reduced accuracy is the result of using common resistors in high voltage pulse measurements. The effect of voltage coefficient and the importance of using resistors with a low voltage coefficient in high voltage measurements is gradually becoming more widely appreciated.

Because future designs are based on voltage measurements made today, it becomes obvious that the use of low voltage coefficient resistive instrumentation is essential for tomorrow's designs.

*This agrees within the limit of 0.02 percent per volt quoted by G.W.A. Dummer⁴. The results quoted for 1 megohm resistors of 1/4 to 2 watt ratings by F. LangfordSmiths⁵ cannot be compared to those obtained at Barth Electronics, Inc., because there is no information on the dimensions of the resistors, and because Barth Electronics test resistors had lower resistance values.

REFERENCES

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