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Doctoral Thesis

**COHERENT ANTI-STOKES RAMAN SCATTERING, SECOND HARMONIC
GENERATION AND TWO-PHOTON EXCITATION FLUORESCENCE
MULTIMODAL MICROSCOPE: REALIZATION, METROLOGICAL
CHARACTERIZATION AND APPLICATIONS IN REGENERATIVE
MEDICINE**

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Coherent Anti-Stokes Raman Scattering, Second Harmonic Generation and Two-Photon Excitation Fluorescence Multimodal Microscope: Realization, Metrological Characterization and Applications in Regenerative Medicine.

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This thesis is dedicated to my family and to all the people who spend their lives for humanity's progress.

Abstract

In the frame of the research in biology and in particular in regenerative medicine, it is widely requested the ability to perform measurements that have a low impact on the observed biological systems. Many measurements imply sample modifications and also sample fixation avoiding living samples measurements.

In this doctoral thesis it is presented the realization of an advanced optical multimodal microscope that integrates coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering, second harmonic generation and two-photon excitation fluorescence techniques in a single powerful tool. The combination of all these microscopy techniques in a single microscope allows gathering more information during samples imaging, implementing fluorescence technique with label free techniques.

A description of the experimental setup of the realized multimodal microscope is presented together with the metrological characterization of the instrument, evaluating the main uncertainty sources that influence the measurement processes.

Label free microscopy techniques allow performing measurements on biological samples with low invasiveness, since to image the specimens it is not demanded any specific sample preparation. This characteristic leads to measurements on living samples with a true low impact, opening new avenues on the research in biology and in particular way in regenerative medicine.

Novel applications of these microscopy techniques are presented to study the extracellular matrix production in both fixed and living samples, as well as to characterize the scaffolds topology and the scaffold-cells interactions in a time-lapse experiment using living samples.

This doctorate thesis is composed by a state of the art chapter in which are discussed the advanced nonlinear optical microscopy techniques from a theoretical point of view, the main experimental implementations of CARS microscopy and the main parameters and properties to be measured relevant in regenerative medicine applications and products.

A chapter is dedicated to the experimental setup for the realization of the multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscope at the I.N.Ri.M. laboratory.

A specific chapter is dedicated to the study of the main sources of uncertainty of the measurements using CARS, TPEF and SHG techniques.

A chapter in which are discussed the biological experiments realized using the multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscope and at the end a final chapter with the conclusion of this doctorate thesis.

This study has been conducted at the Italian institute of metrology (Istituto Nazionale di Ricerca Metrologica, I.N.Ri.M.) as part of the projects REGENMED, METREGEN and ACTIVE with funding respectively from the UE (ERA-NET plus Grant Agreement No 217257) and from Piedmont Region on UE under the programs CIPE 2007- converging technologies, grant 0126000010-METREGEN and POR-FESR I-I.1.3-I1.1 - ACTIVE.

The main accomplished results are:

- The development of the whole experimental multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscopy system
- The theoretical study of the main sources of uncertainty in the measurements with CARS, TPEF and SHG techniques.
- The realization of biological experiments using these microscopy techniques:
 - To study the collagen production from fixed histological sections of human dermal fibroblasts cultured in fibrin gel scaffold using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To study the collagen production by live human fibroblasts and mesenchymal stem cells cultured in fibrin gel scaffold using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To characterize polymeric scaffolds in culture media with a label-free method using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To study the colonization in a two days time-lapse experiment of a polymeric scaffold by human mesenchymal stem cells stained with calcein using CARS and TPEF techniques

Contents

Abstract	iv
Contents	vi
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xv
1. Introduction	1
2. State of the Art	4
Advanced nonlinear optical microscopy techniques	4
Coherent Anti-Stokes Raman Scattering Microscopy.....	4
Coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering process.....	6
Basic of two-photon excitation fluorescence (TPEF) microscopy.....	11
Basic of second harmonic generation microscopy.....	13
Laser sources for CARS microscopy	14
Two picosecond dye-lasers pumped by a mode-locked argon laser.....	14
A femtosecond laser with an optical parametric amplifier (OPA).....	14
Two synchronized mode-locked lasers.....	16
An optical parametric oscillator (OPO) synchronously pumped by a frequency doubled Nd:Vanadate picosecond laser.....	16
Femtosecond laser with photonic crystal fiber (PCF).....	17
Main implementation techniques developed for CARS microscopy	19
Forward detection CARS (F-CARS).....	19
Epi-detection CARS (E-CARS).....	19
Polarization sensitive CARS (P-CARS).....	20
Time Resolved CARS (T-CARS).....	20
Interferometric CARS (I-CARS).....	21
Multiplex CARS (M-CARS).....	23
Important properties and parameters to be measured in regenerative medicine applications	24
3. Experimental setup of the multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscope developed at INRIM	26
Signal-idler Excitation Scheme	28
Signal-1064 Excitation scheme	33
Initial practical realization of the two excitation schemes and preliminary results	37
Signal-idler excitation scheme.....	37

Signal-1064 excitation scheme.....	41
Filtering issues for CARS imaging	42
Scan head and dichroic mirrors.....	55
Second harmonic generation filter set-up	64
Automation on the wavelength OPO setting and on the spectral measurement.....	68
4. Metrological characterization of the multimodal CARS microscope	70
Amount of substance measurements	70
Conclusion	77
Spatial characterization of the multimodal CARS microscope.....	78
Methods	80
Results and Discussion	83
Conclusion	105
5. Realization of biological experiments using multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscopy	106
Multimodal CARS and SHG microscopy for label-free detection of collagen produced by hDFs in fibrin gel.....	109
Introduction	109
Methods	109
Results and Discussion	110
Conclusion	114
Acknowledgements.....	114
CARS and SHG microscopy to follow the collagen production in living human corneal fibroblasts and mesenchymal stem cells in fibrin gel 3D cultures.....	115
Introduction	115
Experimental	116
Results and Discussion	118
Conclusion	121
Acknowledgements.....	121
NLO multimodal microscopy as a novel tool for scaffold characterization in 3D cell culture.....	122
Introduction	122
Experimental	123
Results and discussion.....	124
Conclusion	132
Acknowledgments.....	132
6. Conclusions	133
Future Works.....	134

7. Acknowledgements	135
8. References	136
9. List of Publications.....	141
Book of abstract	141
ISI Paper	141
INRIM Technical Report.....	141
10. APPENDIX.....	143
findDiameterAll_ .java	143
AnalyzeSingleAll_ .java.....	167
findDiameterSingleAllthresMethods_ .java	186

List of Figures

FIG. 2.1 ENERGY DIAGRAMS OF SPONTANEOUS RAMAN SCATTERING (LEFT) AND CARS (RIGHT).	6
FIG. 2.2 CALCULATED THIRD ORDER NONLINEAR SUSCEPTIBILITIES FOR DIFFERENT LINewidths Γ_R . FIGURES ON THE LEFT: $ \chi_{NR}^3 ^2$ (GREEN LINE), $\Re(\chi_R^{(3)})$ (RED CURVE), $\Im(\chi_R^{(3)})$ (BLUE CURVE). FIGURES ON THE RIGHT: RESULTING CARS SPECTRUM $ \chi_{1111}^{(3)} ^2$ FIRST ROW: $\Gamma_R=0.5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. SECOND ROW: $\Gamma_R=1.0 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. THIRD ROW: $\Gamma_R=1.5 \text{ cm}^{-1}$.	9
FIG. 2.3 CALCULATED F-CARS AND E-CARS SIGNALS PRODUCED BY A SPHERICAL SAMPLE. F-CARS AND E-CARS AS A FUNCTION OF THE DIAMETER THE SCATTERER (A); THE RATIO OF THE TWO (B) (FROM [8])	10
FIG. 2.4 ENERGY DIAGRAM OF THE TWO EXCITATION PROCESSES.	11
FIG. 2.5 SCRATCH OF THE FLUORESCENCE INTENSITY DISTRIBUTION ALONG THE FOCUSED BEAM FOR THE TWO EXCITATION PROCESSES.	12
FIG. 2.6 OPTICAL SCHEME OF A REGENERATIVE AMPLIFIER.	15
FIG. 2.7 SCHEME OF TWO MODE-LOCKED SYNCHRONIZED LASERS.	16
FIG. 2.8 OPTICAL SCHEME OF AN OPO INTERNAL CAVITY.	16
FIG. 2.9 OPTICAL SCHEME OF MULTIPLEX CARS SYSTEM BASED ON A PCF FIBER.	17
FIG. 2.10 PCF FIBER SUPERCONTINUUM GENERATION IN FUNCTION OF ITS LENGTH.	18
FIG. 2.11 OPTICAL SCHEME WITH POLARIZERS AND PHASE DIAGRAM.	20
FIG. 2.12 OPTICAL SCHEME OF A T-CARS SYSTEM.	21
FIG. 2.13 OPTICAL SCHEME OF AN I-CARS SYSTEM BASED ON A MACH-ZEHNDER INTERFEROMETER.	22
FIG. 2.14 OPTICAL CHAIN FOR THE PHASE-PRESERVED GENERATION OF WAVELENGTHS FOR THE CARS PROCESS. THE INSET SHOWS THE ENERGY DIAGRAM FOR BOTH PATHS TO THE CARS WAVELENGTH.	22
FIG. 2.15 ENERGY BANDS DIAGRAM RELATED TO THE PUMP AND STOKES PULSES, IN WHICH FEMTOSECOND PULSE IS EMPLOYED FOR THE STOKES SIGNAL.	23
FIG. 3.1 MEASURED RAMAN SPECTRUM OF THE POLYSTYRENE PLATE USED FOR THE CARS EXPERIMENTS. INSET: POLYSTYRENE STRUCTURE AND RELATED RAMAN BANDS.	27
FIG. 3.2 OPO SIGNAL AND IDLER WAVELENGTHS AS A FUNCTION OF FREQUENCY DETUNING IN cm^{-1} . SIGNAL IS USED AS A PUMP WAVE; THE IDLER PROVIDES THE STOKES WAVE. THE EXPECTED CARS WAVELENGTH IS SHOWN AS THE CYAN CURVE.	28
FIG. 3.3 EXPERIMENTAL SET-UP OF THE SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME.	29
FIG. 3.4 EXPERIMENTAL SET-UP FOR SPECTRAL TRANSMITTANCE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE OPTICAL COMPONENTS USED.	29
FIG. 3.5 SPECTRAL TRANSMITTIVITY OF THE DICHROIC FILTER DM740 USED IN THE EXPERIMENT.	30
FIG. 3.6 CONTROL INTERFACE OF THE OPTICAL SPECTRUM ANALYZER BASED ON LABVIEW.	31
FIG. 3.7 SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME: OPO SIGNAL AS PUMP SIGNAL, IDLER AS STOKES SIGNAL. SIGNAL AND IDLER WAVELENGTHS AS A FUNCTION OF FREQUENCY DETUNING IN cm^{-1} .	31
FIG. 3.8 SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME: OPO SIGNAL AS PUMP SIGNAL, ND:YVO ₄ OUTPUT AS STOKES SIGNAL (1064 NM). OPO SIGNAL WAVELENGTH AS A FUNCTION OF FREQUENCY DETUNING IN cm^{-1} .	33
FIG. 3.9 EXPERIMENTAL SET-UP OF THE SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME.	34
FIG. 3.10 OPTICAL DELAY LINE REALIZED FOR SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME.	35
FIG. 3.11 PICTURE OF THE FOCUSING AND COLLECTION OPTICS (LEFT AND UPPER RIGHT), FILTERING BLOCK AND FIBER COLLIMATOR (LOWER RIGHT).	37
FIG. 3.12 MEASURED RAMAN SPECTRUM (BLUE CURVE), EXTRAPOLATED RAMAN SPECTRUM (RED CURVE), CALCULATED CARS SPECTRUM (GREEN CURVE).	38
FIG. 3.13 EXAMPLE OF A SPECTRUM MEASURED OUT OF THE POLYSTYRENE SAMPLE.	39
FIG. 3.14 MEASURED DEPENDENCE OF THE CARS SIGNAL ON THE OPO SIGNAL POWER.	39
FIG. 3.15 MEASURED CARS SPECTRUM WITH SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME.	40
FIG. 3.16 MEASURED CARS SPECTRUM WITH SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME WITH HIGHER RESOLUTION (BLUE CURVE). CALCULATED CARS SPECTRUM GIVEN FOR COMPARISON (RED CURVE).	40

FIG. 3.17 CARS SPECTRUM MEASURED WITH SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME (BLUE CURVE). EXPECTED BEHAVIOUR OF THE CARS INTENSITY IS ALSO SHOWN FOR REFERENCE (RED LINE).	42
FIG. 3.18 OLYMPUS FV300 SCANNING UNIT WITH MAIN COMPONENTS ENLIGHTED.....	43
FIG. 3.19 GRAPHIC INTERFACE OF THE CONTROL SOFTWARE DEVELOPED TO MEASURE CARS SPECTRA THROUGH THE ACQUISITION OF THE OUTPUT PMT VOLTAGE.....	43
FIG. 3.20 SIGNAL IN THE CARS BAND MEASURED BY MEANS OF THE CONFOCAL MICROSCOPE PMT. EXPECTED BEHAVIOUR OF THE CARS INTENSITY IS ALSO SHOWN FOR REFERENCE (RED LINE).	44
FIG. 3.21 SPECTRUM OF THE FORWARD LIGHT PASSING THROUGH THE DICHROIC MIRROR AFTER CARS INTERACTION. AS CAN BE SEEN THE CARS SIGNAL IS MERGED IN A SEA OF DISTURBANCES.	45
FIG. 3.22 MEASURED SPECTRUM OF THE Nd:YVO ₄ LASER.....	45
FIG. 3.23 MEASURED SPECTRAL TRANSMITTIVITY OF THE DICHROIC MIRRORS USED TO CLEAN THE SIGNAL LINE OF THE OPO.	46
FIG. 3.24 MEASURED SPECTRAL TRANSMITTIVITY OF THE CASCADED SHORT PASS FILTERS USED TO REJECT THE RESIDUAL OPO SIGNAL LIGHT.....	46
FIG. 3.25 OBSERVED SPECTRUM AT THE DETECTOR WITH IMPROVED FILTERING AND OPO SIGNAL CLEANING.	47
FIG. 3.26 CARS SPECTRUM MEASURED USING OLYMPUS MICROSCOPE IN FORWARD DETECTION.	48
FIG. 3.27 MEASURED OUTPUT SPECTRUM AFTER FILTERING. THE CARS SIGNAL IS THE ONLY STRONG FEATURE, ALL DISTURBANCES HAVE BEEN EFFICIENTLY SUPPRESSED.....	49
FIG. 3.28 SCHEMATIC OF THE CARS MICROSCOPY SETUP.....	49
FIG. 3.29 OPTICAL SETUP FOR FORWARD CARS DETECTION. FILTER AND PMT HOLDER DESIGNED AND REALIZED AT INRIM (LEFT). OBJECTIVE HOLDER WITH ALL THE DEGREES OF FREEDOM DESIGNED AND REALIZED AT INRIM.	50
FIG. 3.30 SENSITIVITY CURVES OF THE DETECTOR CHOSEN FOR MULTIMODAL MICROSCOPY. PMT HAMAMATSU R3896 SENSITIVITY (LEFT). FAST RESPONSE PHOTODIODE THORLABS DET-36A (RIGHT).	51
FIG. 3.31 FILTERS SPECTRAL WINDOWS VERSUS CARS AND SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME	53
FIG. 3.32 LIST OF THE FILTER SET COMBINATIONS OVER THE CARS SPECTRAL RANGE FOR SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME.	53
FIG. 3.33 FILTERS SPECTRAL WINDOWS VERSUS CARS AND SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME	54
FIG. 3.34 OPTICAL SCHEME OF THE OLYMPUS FV300 SCAN HEAD.....	55
FIG. 3.35 DICHROIC MIRRORS SPECTRAL WINDOWS VERSUS CARS AND SIGNAL-IDLER EXCITATION SCHEME.	56
FIG. 3.36 DICHROIC MIRROR MOUNT FOR ROUND FILTERS TO BE PLACED IN THE FV300 SCAN HEAD.....	56
FIG. 3.37 GRAPHICAL TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF DICHROIC MIRROR DM970 (A), 890-220M-45° (B), 950SP-45° (C).....	58
FIG. 3.38 DICHROIC MIRRORS SPECTRAL WINDOWS VERSUS CARS AND SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME.....	59
FIG. 3.39 GRAPHICAL TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF DICHROIC MIRROR DM850 (A), DM740 (B).	60
FIG. 3.40 TRANSMISSION SPECTRUM OF THE SCAN HEAD INTERNAL EMISSION DICHROIC MIRROR DM570.....	61
FIG. 3.41 TRANSMISSION SPECTRUM OF THE SCAN HEAD INTERNAL EMISSION DICHROIC MIRROR DM630.....	62
FIG. 3.42 TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF THE OPTICAL FILTERS USED IN THE TWO DETECTION CHANNELS.	62
FIG. 3.43 SHORTPASS FILTERS ADDED IN THE MICROSCOPE SCAN HEAD.	63
FIG. 3.44 TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF THE BANDPASS FILTER D455-70X.	65
FIG. 3.45 TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF THE BANDPASS FILTER ET405-20X.	65
FIG. 3.46 TRANSMISSION SPECTRA OF THE BANDPASS FILTER FF01-531-22.	66
FIG. 3.47 SPECTRAL CHARACTERISTIC OF CARS AND SHG SIGNALS WITH SIGNAL-IDLER SCHEME.....	67
FIG. 3.48 SPECTRAL CHARACTERISTIC OF CARS AND SHG SIGNALS WITH SIGNAL-1064 SCHEME.	67
FIG. 3.49 GRAPHIC INTERFACE OF THE CONTROL SOFTWARE BASED ON LABVIEW DEVELOPED TO SET THE OPO WAVELENGTHS.	68
FIG. 3.50 GRAPHIC INTERFACE OF THE CONTROL SOFTWARE BASED ON LABVIEW DEVELOPED TO PERFORM AUTOMATIC CARS (LEFT) AND TPEF (RIGHT) SPECTROSCOPY MEASUREMENT.	69
FIG. 3.51 DETAIL OF THE OPTICAL TABLE WHERE IT IS SHOWN THE BEAM SPLITTER USED TO DEFLECT A SMALL PART OF THE EXCITATION BEAMS IN ORDER TO MEASURE THEIR INSTANTANEOUS POWER WITH A CERTIFIED POWER METER.	69
FIG. 4.1 THE CARS LINE-SHAPES IN THE VICINITY OF VIBRATIONAL RESONANCES OF DMPC (A) AND ADP/AMP/ATP (B). THE CORRESPONDING ME PHASES, $\psi(\omega)$, (SOLID LINES) AND THE ESTIMATED BACKGROUND PHASE, $-\phi_{EST}(\omega)$, (DOTTED LINES) OF DMPC (C) AND ADP/AMP/ATP (D). THE RAMAN LINE-SHAPES OBTAINED FROM CARS SPECTRA (BLUE LINES) AND THE CORRESPONDING SPONTANEOUS RAMAN SCATTERING SPECTRA (RED LINES) OF DMPC (E) AND ADP/AMP/ATP (F) (FROM [69]).....	72
FIG. 4.2 MULTIMODAL CARS-SHG-TPEF MICROSCOPY REALIZED AT INRIM WITH THE ALUMINUM SHIELD TO PROTECT MEASUREMENTS FROM THE AMBIENT STRAY LIGHT.....	74

FIG. 4.3 (BLUE DOTTED LINE) MEASURED CARS SIGNAL FROM POLYSTYRENE SPHERE USING F-CARS. (RED LINE) POLYSTYRENE COMPUTED CARS SPECTRUM FITTED TO THE MEASURED ONE.....	79
FIG. 4.4 (A) SRM 1692 POLYSTYRENE SPHERES CARS SIGNAL AT 3047 cm^{-1} . (B) SRM 1692 POLYSTYRENE SPHERES CARS SIGNAL AT 3018 cm^{-1} . (C) SRM 1692 POLYSTYRENE SPHERES CARS SIGNAL AT 2940 cm^{-1}	79
FIG. 4.5 SHOW A 3D VISUALIZATION OF 1 MM AND 3 MM NOMINAL DIAMETERS POLYSTYRENE SPHERE OBTAINED WITH 3DVIEWER PLUG-IN OF THE SOFTWARE IMAGEJ, USING CARS MICROSCOPY.	80
FIG. 4.6 INTERMEDIATE STEPS OF THE DEVELOPED ALGORITHM. (A) BINARY IMAGE OF THE OBJECT FILTERED FROM "SALT AND PEPPER" NOISE. (B) OUTLINE OF THE BINARY OBJECT. (C) COMPUTED EQUIVALENT CIRCUMFERENCE OF THE OBJECT.	81
FIG. 4.7 (A) XY PLANE CARS IMAGING AT 3047 cm^{-1} OF SRM 1690 NOMINAL 1 μm SPHERE. UNDER THE IMAGE IT IS PLOTTED THE INTENSITY VS X-AXIS RELATED TO THE SECTION COVERED BY THE WHITE LINE. (B) ZY PLANE CARS IMAGING AT 3047 cm^{-1} OF SRM 1690 NOMINAL 1 μm SPHERE. UNDER THE IMAGE IT IS PLOTTED THE INTENSITY VS Z-AXIS RELATED TO THE SECTION COVERED BY THE WHITE LINE.....	84
FIG. 4.8 (A) XY PLANE CARS IMAGING AT 3047 cm^{-1} OF SRM 1692 NOMINAL 3 μm SPHERE. UNDER THE IMAGE IT IS PLOTTED THE INTENSITY VS X-AXIS RELATED TO THE SECTION COVERED BY THE WHITE LINE. (B) ZY PLANE CARS IMAGING AT 3047 cm^{-1} OF SRM 1692 NOMINAL 3 μm SPHERE. UNDER THE IMAGE IT IS PLOTTED THE INTENSITY VS Z-AXIS RELATED TO THE SECTION COVERED BY THE WHITE LINE.....	84
FIG. 4.9 HISTOGRAM OF THE PIXELS INTENSITY DISTRIBUTION IN LINEAR AND LOGARITMIC SCALE RELATED TO THE XY PLANE IMAGES OF 1 MM SPHERE (A AND B) AND OF 3 MM SPHERE (C AND D).....	85
FIG. 4.10 (TOP) AFM IMAGING OF DYNOSPHERE 5 MM POLYSTYRENE BEADS. (BOTTOM) HEIGHTS PROFILE REFERRED TO ONE OF THE LINES TRACED ON THE AFM TOPOGRAPHIC IMAGE.	86
FIG. 4.11 3D VISUALIZATION OF 5 MM NOMINAL DIAMETER SPHERE OBTAINED WITH IMAGEJ 3DVIEWER PLUG-IN, USING CARS MICROSCOPY WITH TWO DIFFERENT LENSES CONFIGURATIONS.	87
FIG. 4.12 MAXIMUM INTENSITY PROJECTIONS OF DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF A 5 MM NOMINAL DIAMETER SPHERE USING A 10X EXCITATION OBJECTIVE AND A 4X COLLECTION OBJECTIVE. IN RED ARE TRACED THE REFERENCES OF THE SIZES MEASURES. (XY) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE XY SECTION ALONG THE Z-AXIS; (ZX) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE SECTION ZX ALONG THE Y-AXIS; (ZY) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE SECTION ZY ALONG THE X-AXIS; (ZX+ZY) SUM OF THE ZX AND ZY SPATIAL PROJECTIONS.	87
FIG. 4.13 MAXIMUM INTENSITY PROJECTIONS OF DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF A 5 MM NOMINAL DIAMETER SPHERE USING A 20X EXCITATION OBJECTIVE AND A 4X COLLECTION OBJECTIVE. IN RED ARE TRACED THE REFERENCES OF THE SIZES MEASURES. (XY) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE XY SECTION ALONG THE Z-AXIS; (ZX) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE SECTION ZX ALONG THE Y-AXIS; (ZY) SPATIAL PROJECTION OF THE SECTION ZY ALONG THE X-AXIS; (ZX+ZY) SUM OF THE ZX AND ZY SPATIAL PROJECTIONS.	88
FIG. 4.14 EQUIVALENT DIAMETERS COMPUTED USING THE DEVELOPED ALGORITHM PER EACH IMAGE SLICE ALONG THE Z-AXIS FOR THE 1 μm NOMINAL SPHERE (A), THE 3 μm NOMINAL SPHERE (B) AND THE 5 μm NOMINAL SPHERE.	90
FIG. 4.15 SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE LARGEST IMAGE IN THE XY PLANE ALONG THE Z-AXIS FOR THE 1 μm NOMINAL SPHERE. (A) PROCESSED IMAGE. (B) HISTOGRAM OF THE PROCESSED IMAGE. (C) THRESHOLDING EFFECT ON THE SHAPE OF THE OBJECT APPLYING INCREASING THRESHOLDING LEVELS. (D) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE THRESHOLDING LEVEL. (E) BINARY IMAGES CREATED APPLYING ALL THE IMAGEJ AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS. (F) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS USED.....	92
FIG. 4.16 SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE MAXIMUM INTENSITY PROJECTION XY SECTION ALONG THE Z-AXIS FOR THE 1 μm NOMINAL SPHERE. (A) PROCESSED IMAGE. (B) HISTOGRAM OF THE PROCESSED IMAGE. (C) THRESHOLDING EFFECT ON THE SHAPE OF THE OBJECT APPLYING INCREASING THRESHOLDING LEVELS. (D) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE THRESHOLDING LEVEL. (E) BINARY IMAGES CREATED APPLYING ALL THE IMAGEJ AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS. (F) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS USED.	93
FIG. 4.17 SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE MAXIMUM INTENSITY PROJECTION ZY SECTION ALONG THE X-AXIS FOR THE 1 μm NOMINAL SPHERE. (A) PROCESSED IMAGE. (B) HISTOGRAM OF THE PROCESSED IMAGE. (C) THRESHOLDING EFFECT ON THE SHAPE OF THE OBJECT APPLYING INCREASING THRESHOLDING LEVELS. (D) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE THRESHOLDING LEVEL. (E) BINARY IMAGES CREATED APPLYING ALL THE IMAGEJ AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS. (F) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS USED.	94

AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS. (F) DIAMETER ESTIMATION USING THE CHOSEN ESTIMATOR IN FUNCTION OF THE AUTOTHRESHOLDING METHODS USED.	104
FIG. 5.1 3D IMAGING Z-PROJECTION OF CELLS STAINED TO TRACK THE DNA (BLUE), THE ACTIN (RED) AND THE INTEGRIN (GREEN) IN ADHESION ON THE DIFFERENT COATINGS MEASURED AT DIFFERENT TIMES.....	106
FIG. 5.2 CARS MICROSCOPY IMAGING OF LIVING A549 CELLS.	107
FIG. 5.3 3D RECONSTRUCTION OF LIVING A549 CELLS IMAGED USING CARS MICROSCOPY.....	108
FIG. 5.4 CARS MICROSCOPY IMAGING OF LIVING HMSCS.	108
FIG. 5.5 IMAGES OF FIBRIN GEL (IN RED) SPIKED WITH COLLAGEN (IN WHITE) AT CONCENTRATIONS OF 1 MG/ML (A)	110
FIG. 5.6 SHG SIGNAL STRENGTH OF ACQUIRED IMAGES (A) USING CONTRAST ENHANCEMENT (B), GAUSSIAN BLURRING (C) AND MANUAL ADJUSTMENT OF THE BRIGHTNESS/CONTRAST LEVELS (D).	111
FIG. 5.7 SHG IMAGES OF COLLAGEN (IN WHITE) SPIKED IN FIBRIN GEL WITH AT CONCENTRATIONS OF 0.05 MG/ML (A) AND OF 0.01 MG/ML (B) AND WITHOUT COLLAGEN (C).	111
FIG. 5.8 IMAGE OF HDFs (IN RED) AND COLLAGEN PRODUCED (IN WHITE) AT CULTURE DAY 0.....	112
FIG. 5.9 IMAGE OF HDFs (IN RED) AND COLLAGEN PRODUCED (IN WHITE) AT CULTURE DAY 7 (A) AND CULTURE DAY 21 (B).	112
FIG. 5.10 IMAGE OF HDFs (IN RED) AND COLLAGEN PRODUCED (IN WHITE) AT CULTURE DAY 42.....	113
FIG. 5.11 BINARY IMAGES OF HDFs ACQUIRED WITH CARS TECHNIQUE (A), OF COLLAGEN PRODUCED BY HDFs ACQUIRED WITH SHG TECHNIQUE (B) AND THE COLOCALIZATION IMAGE OF HDFs AND COLLAGEN (C).....	113
FIG. 5.12 CO-LOCALIZATION PERCENTAGE OF THE COLLAGEN SURFACE REFERRED TO HDFs SURFACE AT DIFFERENT CULTURE DAYS.	113
FIG. 5.13 LIVING HUMAN CORNEAL FIBROBLAST (A) AND HUMAN MESENCHYMAL STEM CELLS (B) MORPHOLOGY IN A 4-MM-THICK FIBRIN HYDROGEL SCAFFOLDS (3D CARS IMAGING IN RED) AND THEIR COLLAGEN PRODUCTION (3D SHG IMAGING IN WHITE) AT CULTURE DAY 0.....	119
FIG. 5.14 LIVING HUMAN CORNEAL FIBROBLAST (A) AND HUMAN MESENCHYMAL STEM CELLS (B) MORPHOLOGY IN A 4-MM-THICK FIBRIN HYDROGEL SCAFFOLDS (3D CARS IMAGING IN RED) AND THEIR COLLAGEN PRODUCTION (3D SHG IMAGING IN WHITE) AT CULTURE DAY 7.....	119
FIG. 5.15 LIVING HUMAN CORNEAL FIBROBLAST (A) AND HUMAN MESENCHYMAL STEM CELLS (B) MORPHOLOGY IN A 4-MM-THICK FIBRIN HYDROGEL SCAFFOLDS (3D CARS IMAGING IN RED) AND THEIR COLLAGEN PRODUCTION (3D SHG IMAGING IN WHITE) AT DIFFERENT DAYS IN CULTURE (DAY 14, 21, 28).	120
FIG. 5.16 MEASURED CARS SPECTRUM OF PHBHV/GEL SCAFFOLD.	125
FIG. 5.17 MEASURED CARS SPECTRUM OF K-BC2000 SCAFFOLD.	125
FIG. 5.18 THREE DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF K-BC2000 SCAFFOLD IMAGED USING CARS MICROSCOPY.	126
FIG. 5.19 IMAGES OF K-BC2000 SCAFFOLD ACQUIRED WITH CARS AND SEM MICROSCOPY AND OVERLAP OF THE TWO IMAGES.	126
FIG. 5.20 THREE DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF A THIN SLAB OF PHBHV-GEL SCAFFOLD IMAGED USING CARS MICROSCOPY.....	127
FIG. 5.21 THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF A COLLAGEN-BASED SCAFFOLD ACQUIRED USING SHG MICROSCOPY.	128
FIG. 5.22 COMPARISON BETWEEN 3D RECONSTRUCTIONS OBTAINED USING CARS (LEFT IMAGE) AND TPEF (RIGHT IMAGE) OF A PORTION OF KBC2000 SCAFFOLD STAINED WITH CYANINE3.	129
FIG. 5.23 THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF THE KBC2000 SCAFFOLD (IN RED) IMMERSSED IN CULTURE MEDIUM (IN BLUE) ACQUIRED USING CARS MICROSCOPY.	131
FIG. 5.24 THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEWS REPRESENTING THE PHBHV-GEL SCAFFOLD (IN BLUE) AND THE HMSCS STAINED WITH CALCEIN AM (IN GREEN) ACQUIRED USING RESPECTIVELY CARS AND TPEF MICROSCOPY TECHNIQUES DURING A TWO DAYS TIME-LAPSE EXPERIMENT. IN THE FIGURE THE SAMPLE MEASUREMENTS ARE DISPLAYED WITH A TIME FRAME OF SIX HOURS FROM EACH OTHER.	132

List of Tables

TABLE 3.1 LIST OF THE SELECTED OPTICAL FILTERS WITH THE SHORT NAME USED IN THE DESCRIPTION OF THE SETUP.	52
TABLE 3.2 LIST OF THE FILTER SET COMBINATIONS OVER THE CARS SPECTRAL RANGE FOR SIGNAL-1064 EXCITATION SCHEME.	54
TABLE 3.3 LIST OF THE CARS, SIGNAL AND IDLER WAVELENGTHS IN FUNCTION OF THE CARS WAVENUMBER IN THE REGION BETWEEN ABOUT 1120 cm^{-1} AND 1320 cm^{-1}	57
TABLE 3.4 EPI-DETECTION SPECTRAL WINDOWS FOR THE SELECTED DICHOIC MIRRORS.	57
TABLE 3.5 EPI-DETECTION SPECTRAL WINDOWS FOR THE SELECTED DICHOIC MIRRORS.	61
TABLE 3.6 SPECTRAL DETECTABLE RANGES FOR CHANNEL ONE USING ALL THE POSSIBLE FILTERS COMBINATIONS.	63
TABLE 3.7 SPECTRAL DETECTABLE RANGES FOR CHANNEL TWO USING ALL THE POSSIBLE FILTERS COMBINATIONS.	64
TABLE 4.1 TABLE OF THE MANUAL MEASUREMENTS RESULTS REFERRED TO THE 5 MM NOMINAL SPHERE USING THE TWO LENSES CONFIGURATIONS.	88
TABLE 4.2 EQUIVALENT DIAMETERS COMPUTED USING THE DEVELOPED ALGORITHM RELATED TO THE LARGEST OBJECT IMAGE SLICE ALONG THE Z-AXIS FOR ALL THE ANALYZED SPHERE TYPES.	90
TABLE 5.1 MEASURED VALUES OF THE SHAPE DESCRIPTOR PARAMETERS OBTAINED BY IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE CARS 3D RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PHBHV-GEL SCAFFOLD.	128
TABLE 5.2 MEASURED VALUES OF THE SHAPE DESCRIPTOR PARAMETERS OBTAINED BY IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE SHG 3D RECONSTRUCTION OF THE COLLAGEN-BASED SCAFFOLD.	129
TABLE 5.3 MEASURED VALUES OF THE SHAPE DESCRIPTOR PARAMETERS OBTAINED BY IMAGE PROCESSING OF THE CARS AND TPEF 3D RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE FLUOROPHORE STAINED KBC2000 SCAFFOLD.	130

1. Introduction

Optical imaging microscopy techniques are widely used as tools and methodologies in many researches and analyses in the fields of biology, pharmaceuticals, material sciences, forensic science, nanotechnologies, etc.

Generally, optical microscopy methodologies are employed to characterize biological samples and to measure for example their physical parameters (sizes, surfaces, morphology, etc.), their biological properties (cell viability, proliferation, signalling, etc.), their chemical properties (molecular biology, proteins, lipids, nucleic acids) or their mechanical parameters (structures, topology, porosity, etc.).

Since the discovery of the cells till nowadays, imaging techniques allowed tremendous progresses in biology. The technologies advanced from the traditional techniques based on transmitted light microscopy and today, fluorescence microscopy based on fluorescent probes that identify the specific biomarkers, is widely used.

However until now there is a lack of studies that evaluate and guarantee the reproducibility and the accuracy of biological measurements specifically addressed to these techniques, together with a general lack of traceability to the International System of units SI. This implies that all the measurements in medical and industrial frames that actually need a strong accuracy, are repeated a large number of times to overcome, with a statistical approach, the lack of a strong metrology. Examples of these solutions are the high-throughput screening (HTS) techniques that allow performing more than 100000 tests per day with last technology progresses. Although these techniques allow understanding the interaction or the meaning of particular biochemical processes in biological systems, this approach leads to very high costs in industrial production chains and in products quality tests. Moreover, biomedical research and in particular, regenerative medicine research, need the development of new techniques that reduce the invasiveness of the measurement methods. A specific activity on this field has been demanded to the National Metrology Institutes (NMI) to give a metrological support to the measurement in the biosciences [1].

Metrology in the bioscience will place the basis of accurate and confident quality control and quality assurance of new products from biotechnology [2]. This will lead to improve strongly the knowledge related to biological processes and to guarantee a better comparison between laboratories reducing the risks of data manipulations and the risks for the public health.

In this doctorate thesis it is proposed the development of advanced nonlinear optics microscopy techniques with low invasiveness, namely: coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering (CARS), second harmonic generation (SHG) and two-photon excitation fluorescence (TPEF). Moreover, the metrological analysis referred to the microscopy measurements is presented together with some specific innovative applications that make use of these microscopy techniques to measure some parameters of great importance in the regenerative medicine.

This study has been conducted at the Italian institute of metrology (Istituto Nazionale di Ricerca Metrologica, I.N.Ri.M.) as part of the projects REGENMED, METREGEN and ACTIVE with funding respectively from the UE (ERA-NET plus Grant Agreement No 217257) and from Piedmont Region on UE

under the programs CIPE 2007- converging technologies, grant 0126000010-METREGEN and POR-FESR I-I.1.3-I1.1 - ACTIVE.

The main accomplished results are:

- The development of the whole experimental multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscopy system
- The theoretical study of the main sources of uncertainty in the measurements with CARS, TPEF and SHG techniques.
- The realization of biological experiments using these microscopy techniques
 - To study the collagen production from fixed histological sections of human dermal fibroblasts cultured in fibrin gel scaffold using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To study the collagen production by living human fibroblasts and mesenchymal stem cells cultured in fibrin gel scaffold using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To characterize polymeric scaffolds in culture media with a label-free method using CARS and SHG techniques
 - To study the colonization in a two days time-lapse experiment of a polymeric scaffold by human mesenchymal stem cells stained with calcein using CARS and TPEF techniques

During the realization of these results also these derived products have been developed:

- Software to control the optical spectrum analyser in order to gather data for the spectral characterization in the infrared region of the filter used based on Labview.
- Software to control the excitation sources wavelength and perform automatic measurements of CARS spectra and TPEF intensity spectra versus excitation wavelength based on Labview.
- An electronic circuit that realizes the transimpedance amplifier of the photomultiplier tube (PMT) output current.
- A filter holder that reduces stray light towards the PMT in forward detection.
- An objective holder with all the necessary degrees of freedom for precise optical alignment during microscopy forward detection.
- A complete shield in aluminium that prevents stray light from the environment during the microscopy measurements.
- Algorithms to perform automatic image analyses.
- An incubator to be placed on the microscopy stage in order to allow multi-day time-lapse experiments.

Some of the accomplished results have also characteristic of originality namely:

- For the first time in Italy have been conducted biological sample imaging using CARS microscopy and combination of CARS technique with SHG or TPEF techniques.
- The proposed method for collagen produced by living stem cells in culture detection using SHG technique as a first signal of cellular differentiation in a non-invasive and non-destructive way.
- The proposed method to use CARS microscopy to characterize scaffolds in culture medium analysing also the cells migration and colonization in a time-lapse experiment using TPEF microscopy.
- The theoretical study of the main sources of uncertainty in the measurements with CARS, TPEF and SHG techniques.

This doctorate thesis is composed by a state of the art chapter in which are discussed the advanced nonlinear optical microscopy techniques from a theoretical point of view, the main experimental implementations of CARS microscopy and the main parameters and properties to be measured relevant in regenerative medicine applications and products.

A chapter is dedicated to the experimental setup for the realization of the multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscope at the I.N.Ri.M. laboratory.

A specific chapter is dedicated to the study of the main sources of uncertainty of the measurements using CARS, TPEF and SHG techniques.

A chapter in which are discussed the biological experiments realized using the multimodal CARS-SHG-TPEF microscope and at the end a final chapter with the conclusion of this doctorate thesis.

2.State of the Art

Advanced nonlinear optical microscopy techniques

The progress in laser technologies with the realization and the spread of ultrafast pulsed lasers has also pushed the realization and the development of new optical microscopy techniques based on non-linear optics (NLO) phenomena.

The combination of pulsed lasers with laser scanning microscopy has opened a wide variety of NLO techniques such as for example coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering (CARS), two-photon excitation fluorescence (TPEF) and second harmonic generation (SHG).

The excitation source optimal for CARS microscopy allows also exciting other non-linear optical processes that could be exploited and implemented in the same microscope in order to get more information from the sample. In this way, with a single tool is possible to use more microscopy techniques simultaneously and for this reason this collection of techniques is called multimodal microscopy.

CARS microscopy allows label-free and chemically selective imaging of the sample in a non-invasive way since no special samples preparations are needed.

Two-photon excitation fluorescence can be used to observe fluorescent tags inside the specimens that can be expressed by the sample itself (fluorescent proteins or endogenous autofluorescence in cells) or added during the sample preparation.

Second harmonic generation is a process that allows observing materials with a non-centrosymmetric molecular structure, since these materials under specific conditions can double the frequency of an impinging light radiation. SHG can be also considered a label-free non-invasive and chemically selective technique and samples can be imaged without any special preparations.

Coherent Anti-Stokes Raman Scattering Microscopy

When a monochromatic radiation impinges a molecular system the light can experience three possible effects: absorption, transmission and scattering. When a molecule absorbs light, the kinetic energy of the hitting photon is completely transferred to the molecular system; when the light is transmitted through the material, the hitting photon passes the material lattice without any perturbation.

The scattering is a process that involves absorption and re-emission of a photon by the molecular system. The scattering could be elastic if the same amount of absorbed kinetic energy is re-emitted (Rayleigh scattering), or inelastic if the kinetic energy of the re-emitted photon is different from that of the hitting photon. Raman scattering is an example of inelastic scattering. If the material absorbs part of the impinging photon energy, the new re-emitted photon will be red shifted with respect to the hitting one and the energy difference is converted in vibrations or rotations of molecule (Stokes Raman scattering shift). If the re-emitted photon absorbs some kinetic energy from the vibrations or rotations of the molecule, it will be blue-shifted with respect to the hitting photon (anti-Stokes Raman scattering shift).

The scattering is an induced secondary emission process and photons can be re-emitted in any directions independently by the direction of the hitting photon that originated the process. The Raman scattering process admits that the molecular system can be excited at an energy level very unstable called “virtual level” that has a very short lifetime of about 10^{-14} second, just enough to allow the photon absorption and re-emission. This phenomena makes Raman scattering different from the fluorescence process since in fluorescence the absorption of a photon, drives the molecule in an excited state that then relaxes vibrationally and electronically in lower energy states with a decay time several order larger than that of Raman scattering.

The Raman spectroscopy is a technique that exploits the Raman scattering processes to investigate the vibrational or rotational modes of molecules, looking at the frequency shifts of the scattered photons. However, in normal conditions, only a very small part of photons impinging a molecular system are scattered inelastically (about one out of a million) and thus the efficiency of this process is very low.

Raman process is related to the polarizability α of a molecule electron cloud and a Raman transition can be activated only in presence of non-zero polarizability with respect to the normal coordinates generally expressed as Q , representing molecule vibrations or rotations.

In the classical framework for the understanding of the Raman scattering process, a photon may be thought also as an electromagnetic radiation that interacting with a material induces a dipole moment P :

$$P = \alpha \bar{E} \quad (1)$$

Where α is the polarizability of the material and \bar{E} is the strength of the electric field of the incident photon. For the incident photon, the electric field may be expressed as:

$$\bar{E} = E_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_0 t) \quad (2)$$

Where ω_0 is the frequency of the incident photon ($\omega_0 = \frac{c}{\lambda}$). If (2) is substituted into (1) yields the time-dependent induced dipole moment:

$$P = \alpha E_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_0 t) \quad (3)$$

The polarizability is a function of the instantaneous position of the constituent atoms of the molecular structure and for every molecular bond the atoms are confined under specific vibrational modes. The vibrational modes have quantized energy and thus only particular vibrational frequencies ω_{vib} . The physical displacement dQ of the atoms due to the particular vibrational modes may be expressed as:

$$dQ = Q_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_{vib} t) \quad (4)$$

Where Q_0 is the maximum displacement about the equilibrium position that typically doesn't exceed the 10% of the overall bond length. In the condition of small displacements, the polarizability may be approximated by a Taylor series expansion truncated at the first term,

$$\alpha = \alpha_0 + \frac{\partial \alpha}{\partial Q} dQ \quad (5)$$

Substituting the eq. (4) into (5) the polarizability is given by:

$$\alpha = \alpha_0 + \frac{\partial \alpha}{\partial Q} Q_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_{vib} t) \quad (6)$$

Using the above relation (6) the induced dipole moment (3) may be written as:

$$P = \alpha E_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_0 t) + \frac{\partial\alpha}{\partial Q} Q_0 E_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_0 t) \cos(2\pi\omega_{vib} t) \quad (7)$$

After recasting using a trigonometric identity the eq. (7) may be written as:

$$P = \alpha E_0 \cos(2\pi\omega_0 t) + \left(\frac{\partial\alpha}{\partial Q} \frac{Q_0 E_0}{2}\right) \{\cos[2\pi(\omega_0 - \omega_{vib})t] + \cos[2\pi(\omega_0 + \omega_{vib})t]\} \quad (8)$$

The last relation shows that the induced dipole moment has three different frequency components, that are ω_0 , $(\omega_0 - \omega_{vib})$, and $(\omega_0 + \omega_{vib})$, which determine the possible frequencies of the scattered radiation. The first scattered frequency ω_0 coincides with the frequency of the incident radiation and it is related to the Rayleigh elastic scattering. The latter two frequencies $(\omega_0 - \omega_{vib})$, and $(\omega_0 + \omega_{vib})$ differ from the frequency of the incident radiation and are related to the inelastic Raman scattering. It must be taken into account that inelastic Raman scattering may exist only if the term $\frac{\partial\alpha}{\partial Q}$ differs from zero. This means that a vibrational mode can be Raman active only if there is a change in the polarizability during the vibrational displacement of atoms. This characteristic makes Raman scattering generally more suitable to detect symmetric vibrations of non-polar groups.

Coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering process

Coherent anti-Stokes Raman Scattering (CARS) is a four waves mixing process that differs from the spontaneous Raman scattering process because the vibrational modes of the material are coherently driven by beating of two optical waves instead of thermal excitation. The CARS signal is directly related to the third order non-linear susceptibility $\chi^{(3)}$, which exhibits resonances of the material. Although CARS is a process that involves three excitation waves, in most of the practical implementations two of the three waves have the same frequency, so that two optical beams do actually interact (provided that one of them, the so called pump wave, contributes to the interaction with two photons).

The energy diagram of a typical CARS process with the involved level transitions is shown in Fig. 2.1 (right side), together with that of spontaneous Raman scattering in its Stokes and anti-Stokes forms (left side). The Raman active vibrational transition occurs at frequency ω_R . The pump wave has frequency ω_p , whereas the second excitation wave, the Stokes wave is placed at $\omega_S = \omega_p - \omega_R$; the CARS wave occurs at $\omega_{aS} = \omega_p + \omega_R = 2\omega_p - \omega_S$.

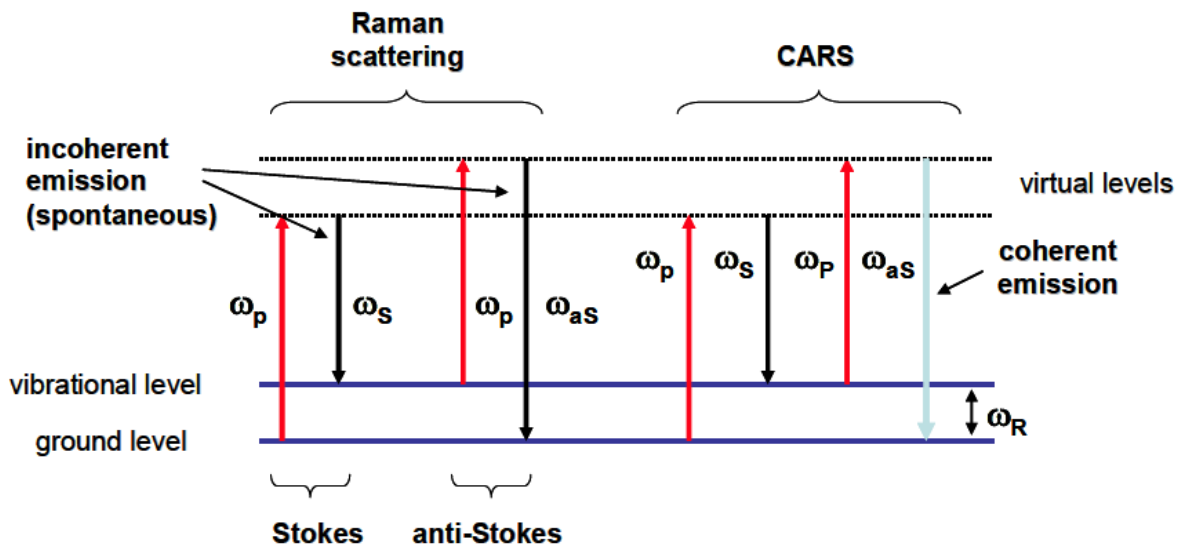


Fig. 2.1 Energy diagrams of spontaneous Raman scattering (left) and CARS (right).

In CARS the Raman active mode of the material is coherently driven (hence the name of the effect) by the beating of the pump and Stokes wave at $\omega_R = \omega_p - \omega_S$. The CARS wave at ω_{aS} results from the inelastic scattering of the wave at ω_p by the molecular vibrations coherently driven by the beating. For the sake of completeness it must be noted that a similar mechanism creates, for reasons of symmetry, another wave at $\omega_{cS} = 2\omega_S - \omega_R$ (Coherent Stokes Raman Scattering, CSRS). In the case of the CSRS the material before and at the end of the scattering process needs to be in an excited vibrational level. This condition makes the detection of this wave more difficult than that of the anti-Stokes wave.

CARS signal being coherently driven by the excitation sources is several orders stronger than spontaneous Raman, allowing faster microscopic and spectroscopic analyses than spontaneous Raman.

Finally, it should be noted that the waves at ω_p and ω_S are directly coupled by Stimulated Raman Scattering (SRS), and experience either gain or loss. These properties form the basis for Stimulated Raman Gain (or Loss) Spectroscopy [3-5].

In the simple case where the interacting fields are described as plane waves propagating along the z axis normal towards a slab of nonlinear material of thickness L, assuming negligible depletion of the excitation fields (pump and Stokes signals) and negligible loss into the material, the solution of the coupled propagation equations for the interacting fields is straightforward [6].

In particular the following expression for the anti-Stokes (CARS) signal intensity exiting the nonlinear slab, $I_{aS}(\omega_{aS}, L)$, is obtained:

$$I_{aS}(\omega_{aS}, L) = \frac{9\omega_{aS}^2}{16\varepsilon_0^2 c^4 n(\omega_{aS})n(\omega_S)n^2(\omega_p)} |\chi^{(3)}(\omega_{aS})|^2 I^2(\omega_p, 0) I(\omega_S, 0) L^2 \frac{\sin^2(\frac{1}{2}\Delta k L)}{(\frac{1}{2}\Delta k L)^2} \quad (9)$$

Where the phase mismatch Δk and the non-linear susceptibility are given respectively by:

$$\Delta k = k_{aS} - (2k_p - k_S) \quad (10)$$

$$\chi^{(3)}(\omega_{aS}) = \vec{e}_{aS} \chi^{(3)} : \vec{e}_p \vec{e}_p \vec{e}_S \quad (11)$$

($k_i = \frac{2\pi n_i}{\lambda_i}$, $i = p, S, aS$; the vectors \vec{e}_i are the unit vectors of the polarization direction of the various fields; the nonlinear susceptibility is in general a four-rank tensor, and the two dots indicate tensor product).

The oscillating term depending on the phase mismatch Δk takes into account the coherent nature of the generation process, where the final signal builds up from coherent addition of the waves generated at different positions along the slab of non-linear material. If the phase-matching condition is not satisfied, $\Delta k \neq 0$, part of the radiation generated along the sample will interfere destructively between each other, so that the output becomes weaker and depends critically on the sample thickness L as discussed below. The observed CARS intensity is maximum when phase matching with the excitation beams is achieved ($\Delta k = 0$); the intensity is proportional to the square of the intensity of the pump field, depends linearly on the intensity of the Stokes field.

The CARS signal intensity depends on the square modulus of the third-order non-linear susceptibility of the material, $\chi^{(3)}$. This is another important feature affecting the spectral behaviour of the CARS emission. In general, the third order susceptibility is made of non-resonant contributions lumped in the term $\chi_{NR}^{(3)}$, and resonant contributions as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \chi_{1111}^{(3)}(\omega_{CARS} = 2\omega_p - \omega_S) &= \chi_{NR}^{(3)} + \\
 &+ \frac{A_{TP}}{\omega_{TP} - 2\omega_p - i\Gamma_{TP}} + \frac{A_{TP}}{\omega_{TP} - 2\omega_S - i\Gamma_{TP}} + \frac{A_{TP}}{\omega_{TP} - (\omega_p + \omega_S) - i\Gamma_{TP}} + \\
 &+ \sum_R \frac{A_R}{\omega_R - (\omega_p + \omega_S) - i\Gamma_R}
 \end{aligned} \tag{12}$$

Where the three terms on the second line are resonant contributions due to two-photon processes produced by the pump and Stokes beams whereas the terms on the third line are resonant contribution due the Raman transitions. The A_R terms are constants related to the mode density and the Raman cross sections of the various active transitions, whereas $2\Gamma_R$ is the corresponding linewidth.

In practice, when using pump and Stokes signal in the near IR the two-photon processes are far from resonance and can be lumped in the non-resonant term. If, finally, in the observation region there is only one active Raman resonance, at ω_R , the third order susceptibility could take the form:

$$\chi_{1111}^{(3)} = \chi_{NR}^{(3)} + \chi_R^{(3)} = \chi_{NR}^{(3)} + \frac{A_R}{\omega_R - (\omega_p - \omega_S) - i\Gamma_R} = \chi_{NR}^{(3)} + \frac{A_R}{\Delta - i\Gamma_R} = \chi_{NR}^{(3)} + \frac{A_R\Delta}{\Delta^2 - i\Gamma_R^2} - i \frac{A_R\Gamma_R}{\Delta^2 - \Gamma_R^2} \tag{13}$$

Where $\Delta = \omega_R - \omega_p + \omega_S$ is the *detuning* from the Raman resonance frequency. The third order susceptibility being a complex number, several terms come in to play in the expression for the CARS intensity, namely:

$$\left| \chi_{1111}^{(3)} \right|^2 = \left| \chi_{NR}^{(3)} \right|^2 + \frac{A_R^2}{\Delta^2 + \Gamma_R^2} + \frac{2A_R\chi_{NR}^{(3)}\Delta}{\Delta^2 + \Gamma_R^2} \tag{14}$$

From eq. (14) appears clearly that the shape of the CARS spectrum is different from that of the Raman spectrum of the vibrational transition obtained traditionally. The CARS spectrum has a marked dispersive character and the emission peak is shifted with respect to the Raman emission line ($\Delta = 0$), depending on the linewidth of the Raman transition.

The CARS spectrum is therefore asymmetrical with respect to the active Raman resonance ω_R . The point where the CARS spectrum crosses the value of the non resonant background does not correspond to the actual Raman resonance. Examples of calculated CARS spectra are given in Fig. 2.2 for various values of the Raman linewidth Γ_R (0.5, 1 e 2 cm^{-1}). In the figures on the left, the real part (red curve) and the imaginary part (blue curve) of the third order susceptibility are depicted together with $\left| \chi_{NR}^{(3)} \right|^2$ (green curve). The Raman spectrum is proportional to the square of the imaginary part of $\chi^{(3)}$ (blue curves). The resulting CARS spectra are given in the figures on the right.

It is important to note that for positive detuning there is a region where there is destructive interference between the CARS signal and the background radiation giving an intensity of the resulting signal lower than that of the background.

The square dependence of CARS intensity on the third order non-linear susceptibility also implies that the generated intensity is proportional to the square of the density of the chemical species under study. This aspect is to be kept in mind when using CARS spectroscopy for quantitative analysis of specimens.

The CARS signal can be detected in forward (k_{AS} along z), forward CARS (F-CARS), and backward direction (k_{AS} along $-z$), E-CARS. The phase matching condition, $\Delta k L \ll \pi$ can be fulfilled if $\Delta k \approx 0$ or $L \approx 0$. It is important to note that for a very thin sample ($L \sim 0$), the phase matching condition is realized in both the