STM JOURNALS
Journal of
Microwave Engineering & Technologies
ISSN: 2349-9001
Volume 13, Issue 1, 2026
January–April
DOI (Journal): 10.37591/JoMET
https://journals.stmjournals.com/jomet
Review JoMET

Dual-Wavelength and Tunable Fiber Lasers for Microwave Photonic Applications

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Abstract

Dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers have emerged as key enabling technologies for advanced microwave photonic (MWP) systems, offering high spectral purity, wide tunability, and enhanced stability. These laser sources play a critical role in generating and processing microwave and millimeter-wave signals through optical means, enabling low-loss transmission and immunity to electromagnetic interference. This review presents recent progress in the design and implementation of dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers, highlighting their operating principles, configurations, and performance characteristics. Various tuning mechanisms, including wavelength-selective filters, fiber Bragg gratings, and nonlinear effects, are discussed for achieving precise and dynamic wavelength control. The integration of these lasers into MWP systems for applications such as signal generation, frequency multiplication, filtering, and sensing is also examined. Special attention is given to their role in supporting emerging high-frequency communication systems, including 5G and beyond, where stable and reconfigurable sources are essential. Additionally, challenges related to mode competition, wavelength stability, and system complexity are addressed, along with potential solutions involving advanced materials and hybrid photonic integration. The review concludes by outlining future research directions, emphasizing the need for compact, energy-efficient, and highly tunable laser architectures to meet the growing demands of next-generation microwave photonic applications with improved integration and stability.

Keywords: Dual-wavelength fiber lasers, tunable fiber lasers, microwave photonics, optical heterodyning, photonic microwave signal generation

INTRODUCTION

Background of Microwave Photonics

Microwave photonics (MWP) is an interdisciplinary research field that combines microwave engineering and photonic technologies to generate, process, and distribute radio frequency (RF), microwave, and millimeter-wave signals using optical systems. The integration of these two domains has enabled significant advancements in high-frequency signal processing, offering advantages such as ultra-wide bandwidth, low propagation loss in optical fibers, immunity to electromagnetic interference, and enhanced signal flexibility [1].

Traditional electronic systems face fundamental limitations when operating at very high frequencies, particularly in the millimeter-wave (mmWave) and terahertz (THz) regions. Issues such as skin effect losses, impedance mismatch, and thermal constraints restrict the performance of purely electronic approaches. Microwave photonics overcomes these limitations by shifting signal processing into the optical domain, where fiber-based systems can handle extremely high bandwidths with minimal distortion [2].

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Received Date: April 29, 2026
Accepted Date: April 30, 2026
Published Date: April 30, 2026

Citation: Kazi Kutubuddin Sayyad Liyakat, Heena T Shaikh. Dual-Wavelength and Tunable Fiber Lasers for Microwave Photonic Applications. Journal of Microwave Engineering & Technologies. 2026; 13(1): 17–25p

The rapid evolution of communication technologies, particularly 5G and emerging 6G systems, has increased the demand for high-frequency carriers, wide bandwidths, and reconfigurable signal sources. In this context, photonics-assisted microwave generation has become a key enabling technology, with fiber lasers playing a central role.

ROLE OF FIBER LASERS IN MICROWAVE PHOTONICS

Fiber lasers are optical sources in which the gain medium is an optical fiber doped with rare-earth elements such as erbium (Er^{3+}), ytterbium (Yb^{3+}), or neodymium (Nd^{3+}). These lasers have gained significant importance owing to their compact structure, high conversion efficiency, excellent beam quality, and ability to operate over a wide range of wavelengths [3].

In microwave photonic systems, fiber lasers serve as highly stable optical carriers that can be used to generate microwave and millimeter-wave signals via photonic mixing or heterodyning techniques. When two optical waves with slightly different frequencies are combined at a photodetector, the resulting beat frequency corresponds to a microwave or RF signal. This principle forms the foundation of optical microwave generation [4].

Among the various fiber laser configurations, dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers are particularly important because of their ability to provide controlled frequency spacing and adjustable wavelength output, respectively.

DUAL-WAVELENGTH FIBER LASERS

Principle of Operation

Dual-wavelength fiber lasers are designed to simultaneously emit two stable optical wavelengths within the same cavity. When combined in a photodetector, these two wavelengths generate a microwave signal with a frequency equal to the difference between the optical frequencies [5].

This optical heterodyning process allows the direct generation of high-frequency microwave and millimeter-wave signals without relying on electronic oscillators. The frequency of the generated signal can be expressed as

Microwave frequency = $|f_1 - f_2|$

where f_1 and f_2 are the optical frequencies of the two laser modes.

Importance in Microwave Signal Generation

Dual-wavelength lasers are widely used for:

- Photonic microwave generation
- Millimeter-wave signal synthesis
- Frequency-agile radar systems
- High-speed wireless communication links

They provide a stable and controllable method for generating RF signals up to hundreds of GHz, which is essential for next-generation communication systems.

Challenges in Dual-Wavelength Operation

Despite their advantages, maintaining stable dual-wavelength operation is challenging due to:

- Mode competition in the laser cavity
- Gain saturation effects
- Environmental instability (temperature and vibration)
- Nonlinear interactions in the fiber medium

To overcome these issues, researchers use techniques such as:

- Fiber Bragg gratings (FBGs)
- Polarization-maintaining fibers

- Multi-cavity designs
- Saturable absorbers and nonlinear filtering

TUNABLE FIBER LASERS

Concept of Tunability

Tunable fiber lasers allow the dynamic adjustment of the output wavelength over a specific range. This tunability is crucial in microwave photonic systems, where reconfigurable frequency generation and adaptive signal processing are required [6].

Tuning Mechanisms

Several tuning techniques are commonly used:

- *Fiber Bragg gratings* enable wavelength selection through reflected Bragg wavelengths.
- *Tunable optical filters* provide adjustable spectral filtering within the cavity.
- *Acousto-optic and electro-optic modulators* allow dynamic control of wavelength spacing.
- *Nonlinear effects* such as four-wave mixing and stimulated Brillouin scattering.

Applications in MWP Systems

Tunable fiber lasers are used in:

- Reconfigurable microwave signal generation
- Adaptive filtering systems
- Frequency-agile communication links
- Optical sensing and spectroscopy

Their flexibility makes them highly suitable for dynamic environments, such as wireless networks and radar systems.

INTEGRATION IN MICROWAVE PHOTONIC SYSTEMS

The integration of dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers into microwave photonic systems has enabled a wide range of applications.

Photonic Microwave Generation

Dual-wavelength lasers are used to generate stable microwave signals through heterodyning, offering high spectral purity and a wide frequency tuning range.

Communication Systems

In modern communication systems, such as 5G and 6G, fiber laser based microwave generation supports:

- High-frequency carrier generation (28 GHz, 38 GHz, and beyond)
- Low-phase-noise signal transmission
- Wide bandwidth data transfer

Radar and Sensing Applications

Microwave photonic radar systems benefit from fiber lasers due to:

- High resolution
- Wide frequency agility
- Resistance to electromagnetic interference

Microwave Photonic Signal Processing

Fiber lasers enable functions such as:

- Optical filtering
- Frequency conversion
- Signal modulation and demodulation

EMERGING TRENDS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Recent advancements in this field include:

- Integration of photonic integrated circuits (PICs)
- Use of nanomaterials such as graphene and carbon nanotubes
- Development of compact and energy-efficient laser systems
- Hybrid optical-electronic signal processing architectures

These developments are pushing microwave photonics toward more compact, scalable, and high-performance systems.

METHODOLOGY

Dual-Wavelength and Tunable Fiber Lasers for Microwave Photonic Applications

The block diagram, as shown in Figure 1 of a dual-wavelength and tunable fiber laser system designed for microwave photonic applications, represents the complete optical-to-electrical signal conversion process, starting from optical pumping and ending with microwave signal generation. Each block in the system plays a specific role in ensuring stable dual-wavelength operation, tunability, and efficient extraction of the microwave signal.

Pump Laser Source

The system begins with a high-stability pump laser, typically operating at a wavelength of 980 or 1480 nm. This pump provides the required energy to excite the Er ions in the gain medium. The stability and power level of the pump directly influence the efficiency of the fiber laser output.

Wavelength Division Multiplexer

The wavelength division multiplexer (WDM) combines the pump signal with the signal path of a fiber laser cavity. It efficiently injects the pump power into the erbium-doped fiber while allowing the generated signal wavelengths to circulate within the cavity with minimal loss.

Erbium-Doped Fiber

The erbium-doped fiber (EDF) acts as an active gain medium, where optical amplification occurs. When pumped, the erbium ions are excited and subsequently emit photons through stimulated emission. This section provides gain over a broad wavelength range, enabling dual-wavelength lasing within the C-band.

Optical Isolator

The optical isolator ensures the unidirectional propagation of light within the cavity. It prevents back reflections that could destabilize laser operation and cause unwanted mode competition, thereby maintaining a stable dual-wavelength output.

Wavelength-Selective Element (FBG/Tunable Filter)

This is a critical block in this system. It selects and stabilizes two specific wavelengths. FBGs or tunable filters are used to:

- Define precise wavelength channels
- Suppress undesired modes
- Maintain stable dual-wavelength operation

In tunable systems, this block is adjustable to vary the output wavelengths dynamically.

Polarization Controller

The polarization controller optimizes the state of the polarization within the cavity. Because birefringence affects interference and gain competition, proper adjustment ensures stable lasing and improved output efficiency.

Optical Coupler

The optical coupler divides the circulating light within the cavity. A portion of the light is fed back into the system to maintain lasing, whereas the remaining output is extracted for external use, including microwave signal generation.

Dual-Wavelength Output

At this stage, two stable optical wavelengths are generated. The wavelength spacing is controlled by the cavity design and the filtering elements. These two wavelengths are essential for producing microwave signals through optical beating.

Photodetector

The dual-wavelength optical signal was converted into an electrical signal using a high-speed photodetector. Owing to the interference (beating) between the two optical frequencies, a microwave or RF signal is generated at the output.

Microwave Signal Output

The final output is a stable microwave signal with a frequency equal to the difference between the two optical wavelengths. This signal is widely used in microwave photonics applications such as

- Radar systems
- Wireless communication links
- Signal processing and sensing systems

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction to Microwave Photonic Fiber Lasers

Dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers have become a key enabling technology in microwave photonics because of their ability to bridge the optical and RF domains. The fundamental principle behind this system is optical heterodyning, where two closely spaced optical wavelengths generate a stable microwave frequency upon photodetection [7].

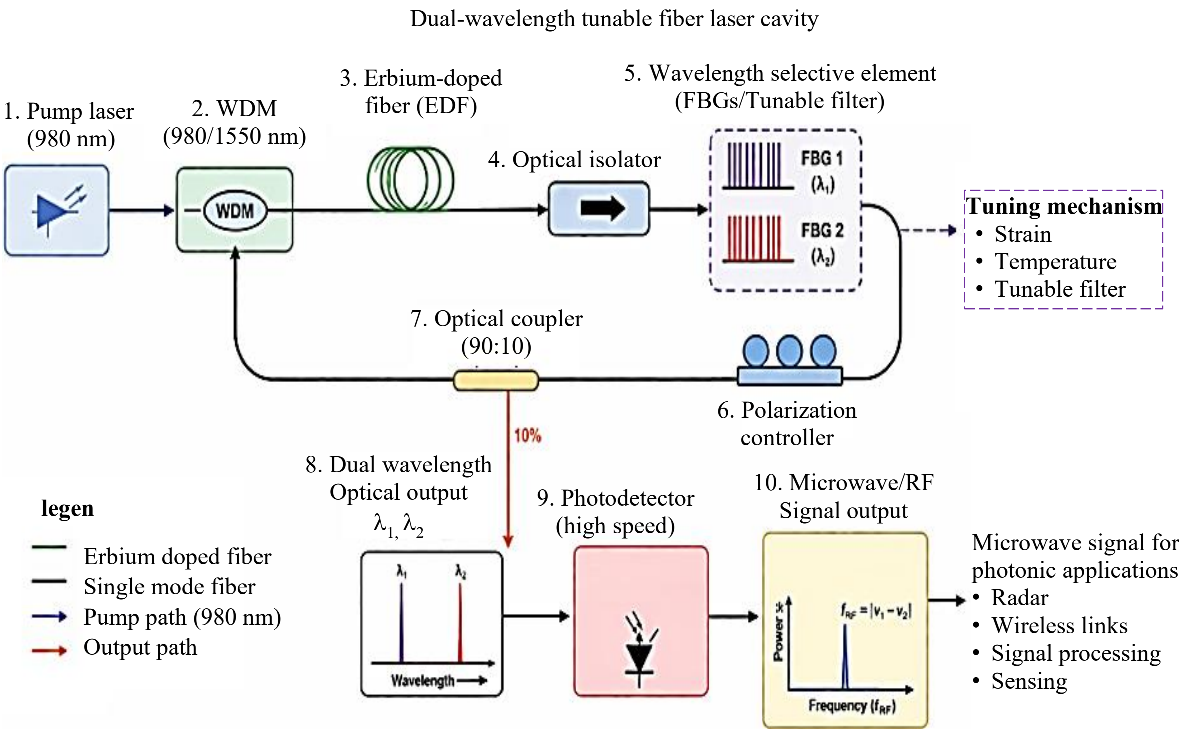

Figure 1. Dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers for microwave photonic applications.

Unlike conventional electronic microwave sources, fiber laser-based photonic systems provide advantages such as low phase noise, wide tunability, immunity to electromagnetic interference, and high-frequency operation extending into the GHz and THz ranges. These characteristics make them highly suitable for modern applications, including radar systems, wireless communication, signal processing, and sensing technologies [8].

The discussion of this system involves understanding not only laser physics, but also nonlinear optical effects, cavity dynamics, and microwave signal generation mechanisms.

Fundamental Principle of Dual-Wavelength Operation

The core concept of dual-wavelength fiber lasers is based on the simultaneous oscillation of two stable longitudinal modes within a single laser cavity. In a typical erbium-doped fiber laser (EDFL), the gain medium supports a broad emission spectrum, usually in the C-band (1530–1565 nm). However, achieving a stable dual-wavelength output requires careful control of mode competition, gain saturation, and nonlinear effects [9].

When two wavelengths, λ_1 and λ_2, are allowed to interfere simultaneously, their optical fields interfere with each other at a photodetector. This beating effect produces a microwave signal whose frequency is given by

$$f_{RF} = \frac{c}{\lambda_1} - \frac{c}{\lambda_2}$$

This principle is widely used because it eliminates the need for traditional electronic oscillators operating at high frequencies.

However, maintaining stable dual-wavelength operation is challenging because of the homogeneous gain broadening in erbium-doped fibers, which tends to favor single-wavelength lasing. Therefore, wavelength-selective elements such as FBGs, Mach-Zehnder interferometers, and tunable filters have been introduced.

Role of Tunability in Fiber Lasers

Tunable characteristics are critical for microwave photonic systems because they allow dynamic adjustment of the generated microwave frequency. In practical systems, tunability can be achieved through several mechanisms.

- Mechanical strain applied to FBGs
- Thermal tuning using temperature controllers
- Piezoelectric stretching of fiber cavities
- Adjustable optical filters

By modifying the lasing wavelengths, the frequency difference between the two optical signals is changed, directly controlling the microwave output frequency.

This tunability enables the system to act as a reconfigurable microwave source, which is particularly useful in cognitive radios, adaptive radar systems, and frequency-agile communication networks.

Fiber Cavity Dynamics and Stability Considerations

The stability of dual-wavelength operation depends heavily on the cavity design. In a typical ring cavity EDFL, light circulates through multiple components, including the gain medium, isolators, couplers, and wavelength-selective elements [10].

One of the major challenges in such systems is mode competition, where one wavelength dominates and suppresses the other owing to gain saturation effects. To mitigate this, researchers have introduced the following:

- Spectral hole burning
- Polarization hole burning
- Spatial hole burning
- Nonlinear gain equalization

Additionally, polarization controllers play a crucial role in stabilizing the output by modifying the birefringence within the cavity. Even small variations in the polarization states can significantly affect wavelength stability.

Nonlinear Effects on Dual-Wavelength Fiber Lasers

Nonlinear optical effects play a dual role in fiber laser systems. While some nonlinearities destabilize the operation, others can be harnessed to improve performance.

Self-Phase Modulation

Self-phase modulation (SPM) causes spectral broadening at each wavelength, which can reduce coherence if not controlled properly.

Cross-Phase Modulation

Cross-phase modulation (XPM) occurs between the two lasing wavelengths and can lead to coupling effects that destabilize the dual-wavelength operation.

Four-Wave Mixing

Four-wave mixing (FWM) generates additional unwanted wavelengths that can interfere with the purity of the microwave signal. Proper cavity design and dispersion management are required to suppress this effect.

Despite these challenges, controlled nonlinear effects can be used to enhance tunability and spectral shaping.

Microwave Signal Generation Mechanism

The key application of dual-wavelength fiber lasers is the generation of microwave signals through photodetection. When the combined optical output is incident on a high-speed photodetector, optical beating produces an electrical signal at the difference frequency.

This process can be understood as:

- Two optical fields, E_1 and E_2, propagate together
- At the photodetector, square-law detection occurs
- The interference term generates a beat frequency

The resulting RF signal is highly stable and can reach frequencies from a few GHz to millimeter-wave bands, depending on the wavelength spacing.

Compared to electronic oscillators, this method provides:

- Lower phase noise
- Higher frequency scalability
- Wider Tunability range
- Reduced electromagnetic interference

Importance in Microwave Photonic Systems

Microwave photonics integrates optical and microwave engineering to overcome the limitations of electronic systems, such as bandwidth bottlenecks and signal degradation at high frequencies.

Dual-wavelength fiber lasers are compact and efficient optical microwave sources. Their importance lies in:

- Generating ultra-pure microwave signals
- Supporting long-distance RF signal distribution over fiber
- Enabling photonic beamforming in phased array antennas
- Supporting high-speed radar and sensing systems

The ability to generate stable RF signals in the optical domain is a major advancement in next-generation communication infrastructure development.

Challenges in Practical Implementation

Despite their advantages, several challenges remain:

- Maintaining long-term wavelength stability
- Suppressing mode competition
- Reducing environmental sensitivity (temperature, vibration)
- Managing nonlinear distortions
- Improving output power efficiency

Research continues to focus on hybrid cavity designs, integrated photonic structures, and advanced filtering techniques to address these limitations.

CONCLUSION

Dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers have emerged as highly promising optical sources for microwave photonic applications owing to their flexibility, stability, and spectral control. The ability to generate two or more stable wavelengths within a single laser cavity provides an efficient means of producing microwave and millimeter-wave signals through optical heterodyning. This significantly reduces the system complexity while enhancing the coherence and signal quality, which are critical requirements in modern communication and sensing systems. Tunable fiber lasers further extend this capability by enabling dynamic control over the output wavelength, allowing adaptation to varying system requirements, such as reconfigurable optical networks, radar systems, and broadband wireless communication. The incorporation of advanced gain media, wavelength-selective components, and nonlinear effects in fiber-based architectures has contributed to improved performance in terms of linewidth reduction, output power stability, and tuning range. In microwave photonics, these laser systems play a vital role in bridging the gap between the optical and RF domains, enabling high-frequency signal generation, processing, and distribution with reduced losses and electromagnetic interference. Their compatibility with fiber-optic infrastructure also makes them highly suitable for long-distance transmission and for integrated photonic systems. Despite their advantages, challenges such as mode competition, thermal stability, and precise wavelength control still require further optimization for large-scale deployment. Ongoing research on FBGs, semiconductor optical amplifiers, and hybrid laser configurations continues to address these limitations. Overall, dual-wavelength and tunable fiber lasers represent a key enabling technology for next-generation microwave photonic systems, offering enhanced performance, scalability, and versatility across a wide range of scientific and industrial applications.

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