Time delays in the synchronization of chaotic coupled lasers with feedback

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Abstract: Isochrony and time leadership was studied in the synchronized excitable behavior of coupled chaotic diode lasers. Each unit of the system had chaos due to feedback with a fixed delay time. The inter-units coupling signal had a second, independent, characteristic time. Synchronized excitable spikes present isochronous, time leading or time lagging behavior whose stability is shown to depend on a simple relation between the feedback and the coupling times. Experiments on the synchronized low frequency fluctuations of two optically coupled semiconductor lasers and numerical calculations with coupled laser equations verify the predicted stability conditions for synchronization. Synchronism with intermittent time leadership exchange was also observed and characterized.

OCIS codes: (140.1540) Chaos; (190.3100) Instabilities and chaos; (140.5960) Semiconductor lasers; (060.4510) Optical communications.

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1. Introduction

Many dynamical systems in nature have chaos due to feedback. A characteristic time, τ_F, associated to the feedback is therefore embedded in the system response. As two or more of such systems are coupled, another independent time, τ_C, corresponding to the time of flight of the coupling signal, enters in the dynamical description of the global system. We present here how the relation between these two times determines the possible time delays in chaos synchronization. New features of time leadership competition in synchronized chaos between coupled pairs of systems with feedback are found when feedback and inter-coupling times have the same order of magnitude. Experimental and numerically, the stability of isochronous chaos synchronism for identical systems occurs only for specific relations between these times. We also show that time delayed and time advanced synchronism as well as synchronism with intermittent leadership exchange are also quantitatively determined by the ratio of these times. Our case is made with pairs of semiconductor diode lasers. However, the properties of synchronization in complex systems extends far beyond physical devices [1], reaching the subject of neural sciences [2].

The study of synchronism with chaotic lasers spreads for more than a decade [3, 4, 5, 6, 10]. Of relevant interest for applications are the results on the synchronization of semiconductor lasers [11, 12] for encrypted communication. With optical feedback diode lasers can present chaos in the form of very fast output power fluctuations, at a time scale of picoseconds. Superimposed on these, irregular power drops occur in a much slower time scale (order of hundreds of nanoseconds and longer) corresponding to the so called low frequency fluctuations (LFF) [13].

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The LFF drops in single lasers are a current subject of studies and have been associated to spikes of excitable systems [14, 15, 16]. Coupled diode lasers show time advanced and time lagging synchronization via unidirectional coupling in master-slave configuration [17, 18] and in mutually coupled systems [19, 18, 20]. Symmetrically coupled pairs of lasers, without feedback, were shown to have unstable isochronous chaotic pulsation [19, 21, 22]. In the experiments and calculations with coupled lasers without feedback, the time leading lasers always appears with its power drops displaced by one unit of the coupling time, τ_C. The use of intermediate relaying system was demonstrated to give stable isochrony [23, 24]. Isochronous synchronization has also been investigated [24, 25, 26] for lasers with feedback with the studies focused on the fast laser fluctuations. Differently, herein we study the synchronization of the low frequency fluctuations (LFF), known to appear at the scale of hundreds of nanoseconds and slower. Thus, in our case the dynamics in the coupled systems is much faster than the synchronized events which have the properties of excitable spikes. So, our results refer to synchronism of excitable dynamical systems.

2. Experimental setup

The schema of the experiments is given in figure 1. Optical feedback was created in each laser

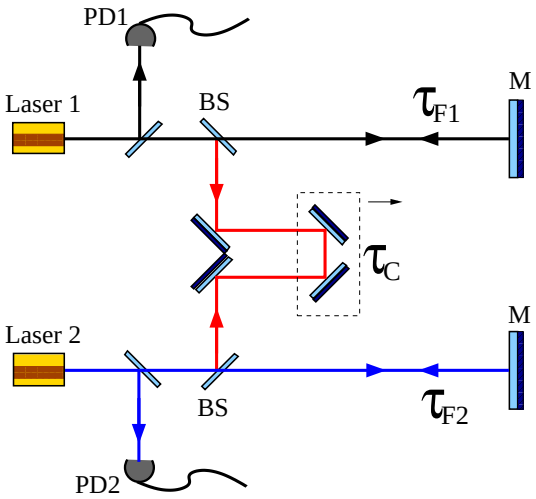

Fig. 1. Experimental setup for the synchronization of Low Frequency Fluctuations in optically coupled laser.

by a retro-reflecting external mirror. Their feedback return times, τ_{F1} and τ_{F2}, were set equal to within 1% precision (both named from hereon τ_F). The time of travel of the coupling signal between the lasers, τ_C, was independently controlled with respect to τ_F. Small changes in either of the times, on the scale of fraction of nanoseconds do not alter the properties of the synchronism. Thus the results, like the LFF phenomenon in single laser with feedback, are robust with respect to optical phase changes. A consequence of such behavior is that our observations are consistent with the synchronization of excitable systems [27]. These authors show how unidirectionally coupled excitable systems can presents one of the systems always with a lower threshold for excitability. Their coupled systems synchronize to an external common signal. In our case the coupled systems have fast fluctuations and so, no external source of excitation is necessary.

The experiments were done with two SDL 5401 *GaAlAs* semiconductor lasers, named here as Laser 1 and Laser 2, both with solitary threshold current of 21 mA and emitting at 805

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nm. They were thermally stabilized to 0.01 K and could be temperature tuned to have their optical frequencies within 2 Ghz separation. The feedback time of the lasers was τ_F = 10 ns and the strength were measured by the threshold reduction parameter, ξ which is the percentual variation of the threshold pump current as we consider the laser with and without feedback [13]. Symmetrical optical coupling between the lasers was produced with 50% beam splitters as shown in figure 1. The time of flight of the light between the lasers was varied between 5 and 20 ns. The threshold reductions due to cross input power were used to quantify the coupling strengths whose contribution to our studies will be detailed elsewhere. Manipulating the laser currents and temperatures, LFF synchronism was obtained where to each power drop in laser 1 corresponds a drop in laser 2 and vice versa.

3. Results

Typical experimental segments of the power output of the two lasers, with three events of the synchronized low frequency fluctuations (LFF) drops, are shown in figure 2. Each laser intensity

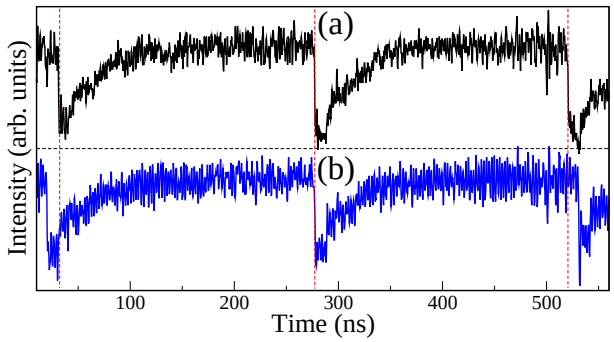

Fig. 2. Segment of experimental time series of the power of (a) laser 1 and (b) laser 2, showing the low frequency synchronism and including the interchange of time delay between the lasers. τ_F = 10 ns and τ_C = 10 ns.

was detected by a 1.5 GHz bandwidth photodiode. Simultaneous data series were acquired with a two channel digital oscilloscope having a bandwidth of 1 GHz and a maximum sampling rate of 5 GSamples/second. One of the lasers could always be the time leader by setting its pump current or its optical frequency [19] higher. However, as careful tuning of the laser currents and optical frequencies is made, within the same long LFF synchronized time series the LFF drops of laser 1 can appear isochronous, leading or lagging these of laser 2. Such were the conditions of figure 2 where the time leadership is interchanged between drops one and three, while the second LFF drops are isochronous. Using long pairs of data series, coarse grained to a 1 ns time resolution [16], we measured $\Delta T_i = T_{1i} - T_{2i}$, the delay between the LFF drop i of laser 1 and laser 2.

The main result of this work is to show that, within any LFF synchronized evolution, for any pair of excited drops the allowed delays are given by

$$\Delta T_i = m_i \cdot \tau_C - n_i \cdot \tau_F \tag{1}$$

where $m_i \neq 0$ and n_i are small integers. Here we only give indications of $m_i = \pm 1$ but preliminary results with very long numerical series show rare events with $m_i > 1$. Equation 1 covers various previously studied cases in the literature and confirms novel observations. For instance, with the lasers having no feedback, $\tau_F = 0$, it verified that isochrony is not allowed [19]. Other cases with feedback but forbidding isochrony are given below. The equation determines ΔT_i

#114964 - $15.00 USD Received 29 Jul 2009; revised 4 Nov 2009; accepted 4 Nov 2009; published 10 Nov 2009

when one laser is always leading or lagging which happens for a single pair (m_i, n_i) through the whole time series. Furthermore, it is also valid for cases with varying values of (m_i, n_i) within the same series, obtained from symmetrical and nearly symmetrical systems. The LFF synchronism then appears with intermittent switching of the time delay that can interchange the leading subsystem. The evidence of equation 1 as a property of the LFF synchronism was obtained inspecting many different feedback and coupling delay times in experimental and numerical series. The origin of equation 1 is present in the intensity cross-correlation functions of the fast fluctuations of coupled lasers. These correlations, obtained with sub-nanosecond resolution, show recurrent narrow spikes (width of hundred of picoseconds) at positions and intervals given by Eq. 1.

Let us proceed presenting our experiments along with the numerical-theoretical results extracted from a system of differential equations that describe two mono-mode lasers with optical feedback and optical coupling. The model correspond to a set of modified equations for the lasers with feedback [28], including symmetrical optical coupling and assumed to have optical frequence detuning $\Omega = \omega_2 - \omega_1$:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{dE_i(t)}{dt} &= \frac{(1+i\alpha)}{2}\left[G(N_i) - \frac{1}{\tau_p}\right]E_i(t) + \kappa E_i(t-\tau_F)\exp(i\phi_i) \\ &\quad +\gamma E_{j\neq i}(t-\tau_C)\exp(-i\Omega_j)(t-\tau_C) \qquad (2) \\ \frac{dN_i(t)}{dt} &= J_i - \frac{N_i(t)}{\tau_s} - G(N_i)\left|E_i(t)\right|^2, \qquad (3) \end{aligned}$$

where $i, j = 1, 2$, $\Omega_1 = +\Omega$, $\Omega_2 = -\Omega$ and each laser gain is given by

$$G(N_i) = \frac{G_0(N_i - N_0)}{1 + \varepsilon\left|E_i(t)\right|^2} \qquad (4)$$

The definition of the various parameters and their typical values are well discussed in the literature [13, 15]. For each laser, E_j is the radiation field amplitude , ω_i is the optical frequency, α is the factor describing amplitude to phase conversion, G is the amplifying gain, $N_j(t)$ the carriers inversion population, τ_p the photon lifetime of the internal laser cavity, τ_s the carriers lifetime, J_j the threshold normalized pump currents and N_0 the inversion population for medium transparency. Each feedback field has an amplitude coefficient κ and feedback time τ_F. The optical couplings are linearly additive E field with coefficient γ and time delay τ_C for the field of one laser to reach the other one. Physical causality demands that both τ_F and τ_C be positive. The fixed phases of each laser are ϕ_i. Their contribution to the LFF events and the lasers synchronizations is not significant [7, 10]. Conversely, the optical frequency detuning can play a major role in the synchronization [18, 7, 10].

With a fourth order Runge-Kutta algorithm numerical data series were obtained for $E_i(t)$ and these gave the normalized intensity series $|E_i(t)|^2$. The time scales in the integrations and the equations parameters, if not stated otherwise, were fixed as: dt = 1 ps, $1/\tau_p$ = 282 ns^{-1}, $N_0 = 1.5 \times 10^8$, $\varepsilon = 5 \times 10^{-7}$, $\kappa = \gamma$ = 22 ns^{-1}, $1/\tau_s = 1.66$ ns^{-1}. The times, τ_F and τ_C, are in the nanosecond range.

Calculations with zero frequency detuning and equal parameters and pump currents ($J_i =$ 1.013), corresponding to symmetrical systems, produced numerical time series with leadership exchange, again in agreement with the experiment. Segments of these data series are shown in figure 3, to be compared with the experimental segments in figure 2. Calculation with one laser having sufficiently higher pump current gives synchronized LFF with the laser of higher pump current always leading in time, as observed in the experiments. More on the sensitivity of the calculated dynamics with respect to changes on the parameters of equations 3, will be

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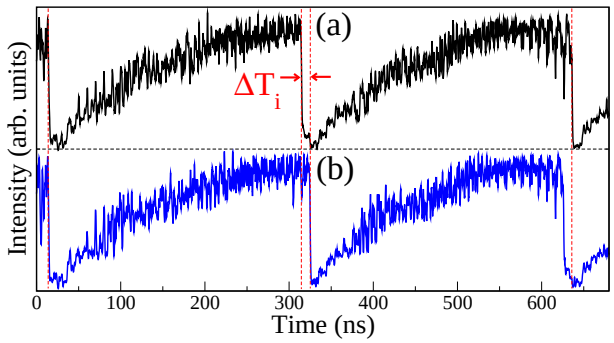

Fig. 3. Typical segment of the numerical time series of (a) laser 1 and (b) laser 2 LFF power drops under synchronized condition. Notice that the first drops are isochronous while time leadership was interchanged between drops two and three. τ_F = 10 ns and τ_C = 10.05 ns.

discussed below. Let us emphasize that no stochastic terms are used in the equations. The apparent random time distribution of the LFF events in each laser as well as the time leadership switching in the synchronism is due to the excitable nature of LFF as discussed in [14, 16]. If this excitable nature of LFF occurs for single lasers with feedback it also will be manifest as the fast fluctuations of one laser excites the LFF of the other, in a coupled scheme. It must be observed that the current argument do not eliminate the controversial possibility of the main origin of LFF in single lasers as due to external noise or internal fast fluctuations.

Numerical time series with $\sim 10^4$ pairs of drops were coarse grain filtered [16] with a 1 ns time constant, and used to extract histograms of time delays between the drops. The switching of leadership from symmetrical systems was also examined and no correlation was found between consecutive values of ΔT_i, up to second order conditional probability. This is indication of a Markov process, obtained despite the fact that the data came from deterministic numerical equations with recurrence times τ_F and τ_C. Such result is consistent with an interpretation of a pair of excitable systems created by high dimensional chaos with largely different time scales. The ultrafast pulses (scale of hundreds of picoseconds) existing in each laser acts as excitation pulses to trigger the LFF drops. The time difference ($T_{i+1} - T_i \gg \tau_F, \tau_C$) among the LFF drops of each of the two lasers appear as stochastic without memory [16]. The experimental data show the same lack of correlation for the delay times of LFF synchronism in symmetrical conditions. The histograms associated to the data series of figures 2 and 3, are shown in figure 4.

With τ_F = 10 ns and τ_C = 10 ns, equation 1 with $m_i = \pm 1$ and $n_i = \pm 1$, predicts $\Delta T_i = 0, \pm 10\,ns$ and $\pm 20\,ns$. Indeed, the histograms show that isochrony occurs, along with time leadership exchange events. The major probabilities are for events with $\Delta T_i = 0$ and $\pm$ 10 ns, with few events at $\pm$20 ns and some in $\pm$30 ns on the experimental data. It is important to mention that for the calculations with totally symmetrical lasers, (figure 4 (b)), $\tau_C \neq \tau_F$ ($\tau_C = 10.05$ ns) a small difference ($\tau_F = 10$ ns and $\tau_C = 10.05$ ns) was necessary to give the non isochronous events. In fact such differences which are intrinsically present in the experiments change dramatically the amplitude of the peaks in the histograms but have minor effect on the values of the allowed delays in synchronized LFF. The robustness of the relation between delay times and the condition of LFF synchronization according to equation 1 was also inspected for small, up to 10%, of relative variations of τ_F and τ_C. The sensitivity of the amplitudes of the histograms with some of the lasers parameters is very stong. Within the equal optical frequency calculations we could observe the dependence on the lasers currents, as given in figures 4 (b) and (c). As the pump currents were made different, the laser with higher current begins to dominate, presenting earlier LFF drops.

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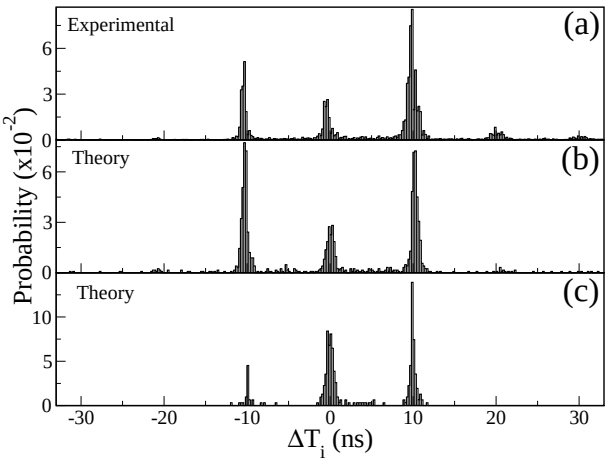

Fig. 4. Histograms of the time delays between LFF pulses of the two synchronized lasers with τ_F = 10 ns and τ_C = 10 ns(a) experimental, (b) numerical calculated with no optical detuning and equal parameters and (c) numerical with laser 2 and 1 having currents 1.014 and 1.013 above threshold, respectively.

Another typical experimental and numerical set of histograms, where m_i and n_i change within the same synchronized evolution, is shown in figure 5. This is a case of symmetrical system

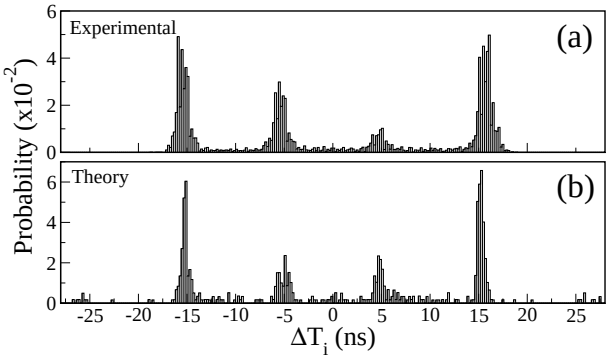

Fig. 5. Histograms from experimental (a) and numerical (b) series for the time delays between LFF drops of the two synchronized lasers: τ_F = 10 ns and τ_C = 15 ns. These delay values do not allow isochrone events, according to Eq. 1

where the laser parameters are equal but the values for time of coupling and feedback, were chosen to give unstable isochrony: $\tau_C = 15$ ns and $\tau_F = 10$ ns. Accordingly, in equation 1 these values prevent $\Delta T_i = 0$, as seen by direct substitution of small integers($m_i = \pm 1$). Thus, in a large time scale synchronism of the LFFs holds, but there is always a finite time lead between the two lasers. The leadership can be exchange but events of simultaneous drops are excluded. A special case of this condition is the original paper by Heil it et al. [19] describing non isochrony in the synchronized LFF of two diode lasers without feedback and optically coupled.

When $\tau_C \gg \tau_F$ we verified numerically that equation 1 still holds. The value of m_i is always ± 1 while n_i assumes a large range of values. Isochrony is absent and the dominant events occur with $n_i = 0$, corresponding to delays of $\pm\tau_C$. Nonsymmetrical systems, as mentioned above, also follow equation 1. A calculation with the two lasers having the same current $J_i = 1.013$

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is given in figure 6 (a) while figure 6 (b) shows what happens when laser 1 has its current augmented to $J_1 = 1.025$. The laser with higher current is always the time leader, even though sometimes its leading time jumps between τ_C and $\tau_C - \tau_F$. These events correspond to LFF drops with $m_i = 1$ and $n_i = 0$ changing to $m_i = 1$ and $n_i = +1$ along the dynamical evolution with synchronized LFF excitation spikes.

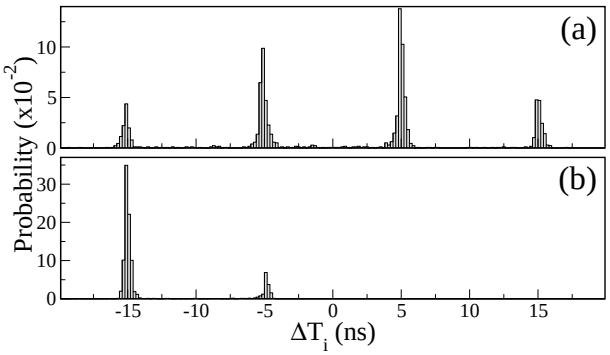

Fig. 6. Histograms of the numerical delay times between synchronized LFF drops of the lasers with $\tau_F = 10$ ns and $\tau_C = 15$ ns and showing the effect of asymmetric conditions in the pump currents. In (a). $J_i = 1.013$ for the two lasers and in (b) $J_1 = 1.025$ and $J_2 = 1.013$, making Laser 1 the time leader.

Optical frequency detuning between the lasers was investigated in numerical solutions. The results for coupled lasers as in Eq. 3 verifies the previous results established in master-slave diode lasers synchronization [18, 19, 7]: With other parameters equal, the laser with higher optical frequency is advanced in time. Our new results, for bidirectional coupling also shows the higher optical frequency laser leading the synchronized LFF drops, even when there is intermittent fluctuation in the advanced time difference. This is shown in figure 7. A striking difference is observed in the amplitudes of the histograms for $\Omega/2\pi = +1$ GHz and $\Omega/2\pi = -1$ GHz, even though the ΔT_i delays remain at the same positions in the two cases. The two sets of histograms are calculated from time series that are not symmetrical in their fast fluctuations as we changed the signal of Ω. This is the reason for the histograms not to be perfectely mirrored with respect to zero detuning (the peak at -5 ns is not reproduced with the same amplitude at $+5$ ns).

The physical origin of the intermittent interchange of delays in the synchronized lasers of our experiments may be attributed to the excitable nature of LFF in single diode lasers with feedback. According to Giudici *et al.* [14], the LFF power drops in a diode laser with optical feedback have the features characteristic of an excitable system driven by external noise. The LFF spikes can also be interpreted as the excited spike induced by the fast fluctuations (hundred picoseconds) contained in the deterministic dynamics of these lasers [15, 16]. The case of two lasers synchronization treated as a pair of of excitable systems using a common external noise source has also been studied by Cisak it et al. [27]. Considering the fast fluctuations of each laser as the equivalent noise that triggers their LFFs, the optical coupling makes each laser be subject to both fluctuations and so their LFFs will be excited by a correlated source of equivalent noise. Such fluctuations are correlated with peaks that depend on the feedback times and the inter-units delay time. Thus synchronized LFF drops can occur excited by fluctuantions which give an apparent random distribution to their delay times; these delay times allways happening at the peaks of the fast correlation.

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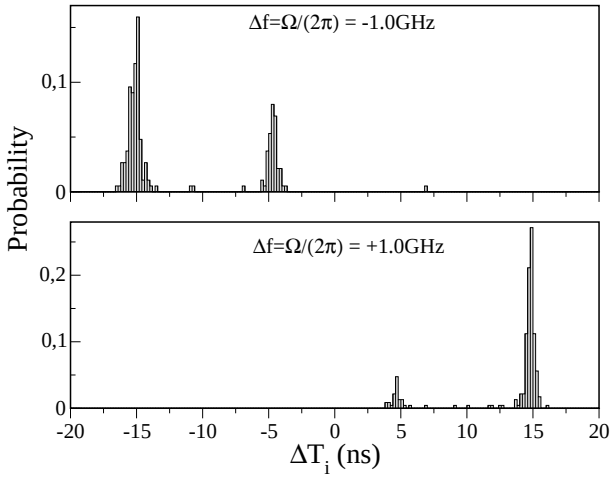

Fig. 7. Histograms of the numerical delay times between synchronized LFF drops of the lasers with $\tau_F = 10$ ns and $\tau_C = 15$ ns and $J_i = 1.013$, showing the effect of optical frequency detuning. Above, with $\Omega/2\pi = -1$ GHz, laser 1 had higher frequency and was time leader in the LFF synchronized drops. Below, the optical frequency was higher for laser 2, which became time leader. See text for explanation on the difference between the two histograms

4. Conclusion

To summarize, from experiments with coupled diode lasers with feedback, corroborated by the numerical solutions of the corresponding rate equations, we discovered that the delay time in the synchronization of coupled excitable systems with feedback is controlled by a simple relation between feedback time and inter-coupling time. The dynamics may have one of the systems with a fixed time leadership or have its leading time switching values by discrete steps depending on the values of the coupling and feedback times. Nearly symmetrical systems can also have intermittent time leadership exchange always maintaining the excitable spikes synchronized in the large time scale. A simple equation that specify the intercombinations of feedback and coupling time to give the allowed values of delay in the synchronized dynamics was introduced. Coupled asymmetrical systems also follow the conditions for the allowed delay time between events. The various parameters of the systems strongly influence the probability of specific delays, distorting the histogram amplitudes, but, within the same range of variation, have no effect on the values of the allowed time delays. Our results extend the previous [19] determination of the symmetry breaking and instability of expected isochrony in the synchronism of identical coupled chaotic systems without feedback. It also adds to the recently studied properties of isochronal synchronism presented in [25] and [9], who emphasize the potential application of these properties for encrypted communication. Effects of pump current and optical frequency detuning have been shown to follow observations reported for coupled diode lasers when at least one do not have optical feedback [18, 19]. It must be cautioned, however, that a throughly exploitation of the many parameter space of the two lasers, which is beyond this work, is lacking to characterize the range of validity of the observations near symmetrical lasers operation. A formal mathematical treatment of the stable and unstable fast dynamics chaotic synchronization with delays having integer combinations between feedback and coupling time will be presented elsewhere. The phenomenon of selection condition in time delays is bound to appear generically in mutually coupled dynamical systems and to have applications in schemes

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