METHODOLOGY TO DETERMINE TYPICAL BUBBLE SHAPE IN INTERMITTENT FLOW FROM WIRE-MESH SENSOR DATA

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Abstract. Wire-mesh sensors are flow imaging devices which produce three-dimensional data of void fraction distribution at high resolution thus being an appropriate tool to investigate two-phase gas-liquid flows. Slug flow is typically found in petroleum production lines. This type of flow is characterized by the intermittent occurrence of gas bubbles and liquid slugs along the pipe. An important issue of these flows is the existence of a variety of regimes, depending on the flow rates of gas and liquid. The quantitative and qualitative information about shapes of the bubble nose and tail allows to study and to model the flow characteristics in order to increase safety and profit margins in operation of pipelines. In this paper we describe a methodology to determine typical bubble shape of gas-liquid slug flow, which are based on ensemble mean and median approaches, for a set of identified bubbles in a given experiment. Results show that both approaches produce similar estimations, however since median is a type of robust estimator, contours of bubbles are better defined. Three-dimensional images of typical bubbles, for five different operational conditions, are generated and reveal some details about bubble shape.

Keywords: two-phase flow, wire-mesh sensor, bubble identification, robust estimation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Flows involving the simultaneous transport of gas and liquid in pipes are present in many industrial applications, among them in food, nuclear, aerospace, geothermal and petroleum industry, just cite a few. In the last decades, an intense effort has been devoted to the study and modelling of the flow characteristics in order to increase safety and profit margins in pipeline operations. An important characteristic of two phase flows is the existence of a variety of flow regimes, depending, among other variables, on the flow rates of each phase. A specific case of two-phase flow very common in oil and gas production lines is the slug flow regime (also classified as intermittent flow) (Al-Hadhrami et al., 2014), which consists of liquid slugs alternating with elongated gas bubbles. Understanding slug flow is made difficult by its transient nature and the multi-dimensional fluid dynamic process that characterizes it (Havre et al., 2000).

The quantitative and qualitative information about shapes of the bubble nose and tail are important to understanding the dynamic of such flows and also for supporting the development of flow models. In addition, experimental data obtained in controlled conditions (e.g. pilot plants) can be used as database for validation of computer simulations, which in turn may provide better tools for designing new and improved facilities and plants, eventually increasing safety and efficiency in operation of pipelines. Therefore, measurement and imaging of two-phase flows has received much attention in past. Hence, several flow imaging modalities have been developed, tested, and applied, ranging from high-speed cameras and image processing algorithms (De Oliveira et al., 2015; Pipa et al., 2014) to complex tomography systems (Li et al., 2013; Froystein et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2014; Thorn et al., 2013).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Wire-mesh sensor

Wire-mesh sensors are imaging instruments that have been used widely for gas–liquid and liquid–liquid two-phase flow measurements. It provides flow images at high spatial and temporal resolutions and it has been applied by many researchers for multiphase flow imaging. The sensor consists of two electrode planes spanned in the cross section of the
pipe. Each plane of parallel stainless steel wires (transmitter and receiver) has an angle of 90° to each other and are separated by a small axial distance, forming a grid of electrodes. The associated electronics measures an electrical property (resistance or capacitance) of the flowing media in the gaps of all crossing points at high repetition rate. Based on raw data and knowing the electrical properties of substances involved, it is possible to determine instantaneous phase distribution of a two-phase mixture over the cross-section (Prasser et al., 1998).

In capacitance wire-mesh sensor, a sinusoidal alternating voltage is applied for excitation and the receiver circuit must encompass a demodulation scheme, for details see: (Da Silva et al., 2007). Since the gaseous and liquid phases present different electric permittivity, the obtained sensor readings are an indication of the phase present at each crossing point. Images of cross sectional distribution of phases at high repetition rates (up to Kilohertz range) are achieved by a multiplexed probing-sensing schema.

2.2 Data processing

A 3D-fill algorithm was developed using a threshold segmentation method and the bubbles identification in the gas fraction distribution $\alpha(i, j, k)$ was carried out upon the three-dimensional data array measured from wire-mesh sensor in which the values are proportional to the gas volume fraction. Previous works have been used similar approach [20, 23-24] whereby a 3D-fill recursive algorithm using 6 neighbours in the 3D voxel space is used. In this work we present a 3D-fill non-recursive algorithm that uses 26 neighbours to better extract the characteristics of spatial data. Using a non-recursive technique allows us to decrease the processing time and overcome stack overflow issues due to excessively deep or infinite recursion. For the process of bubble identification, the following steps are applied:

- Binarization of the three-dimensional gas-fraction (void-fraction) matrices by thresholding the voxel of a given 3D data in order to classify into two groups (gas bubbles and liquid water).
- Identification and labelling of bubbles, i.e. assigning each bubble a unique label of the array of measured local instantaneous gas fractions.

In the binarization process the threshold is a crucial parameter for correct identification of bubble, allowing the distinction of one phase from another, and a joining scheme to connect regions and identify bubbles. If the value chosen is low, it is possible that some of the bubbles will be artificially divided or smaller bubbles may be ignored, if the threshold chosen is high, neighbouring bubbles can be identified as one bubble despite the fact that the gas fraction gradient may suggest independent bubbles. In general, the choice depends from the noise level of the sensor raw signal.

In the identification process, a recursive fill algorithm analyses 26 neighbours (voxels share one faces, one edge and one vertex) to better extract the characteristics of spatial data, which is required to identify small bubbles in the 3D voxel space. As the bubbles are found the constituting voxels get labelled with the same identifier number. Figure 1 depicts the identified bubble as voxels grouping within the 3D-space.

In order to estimate the 3D bubble shape, the temporal index needs to be rescaled with the velocity of each individual bubble. Thus, a linear interpolation in z-axis is necessary to convert frames unity to m. In this work, each frame was convert to 2.1 mm of resolution in order to keep the aspect ratio with the x- and y-axis. Afterwards, the bubbles are aligned from their nose tips and arranged as

$$b_n(i, j, k')$$

(1)
where \( n \) is the index of the bubble, \( i \) and \( j \) are the wire indices, \( 1 \leq k' \leq K \) is a rescaled temporal index and \( K \) is typically the length of the longest bubble found in an experiment. As an illustration, \( b_1(i, j, 1) \) and \( b_2(i, j, 1) \) represent the cross sections adjacent the nose tips of bubbles 1 and 2 respectively (Figure 2).

This arrangement allows to calculate a voxel-wise 3D averaged bubble as

\[
\bar{b}(i, j, k') = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} b_n(i, j, k').
\]

Similarly, we can replace the mean operator by the median, yielding

\[
\tilde{b}(i, j, k') = \text{MEDIAN}_n \{ b_n(i, j, k') \},
\]

where \( \text{MEDIAN}_n(.) \) is an operator that calculates the median along the index \( n \).

3. RESULTS

From the data set (46 measurements), five measurements were chosen to represent the main results and validation of the technique, including both non-aerated and aerated slug flows. Figure 3 shows the results of mean and median approaches for different flow conditions, namely different pairs \((j_L = 1.5 \text{ m/s}, j_G = 0.5 \text{ m/s} \text{ to } 1.5 \text{ m/s})\). Since alignment is performed from nose tips, both mean and median approaches generate rather sharp images around the front of bubbles. However, the tails are visibly blurrier in the mean images. In contrast, the median images show better-defined contours at the tails, with clearer edges.

Figure 3. Results of mean and median approaches for different flow conditions. 3D superficial shapes of typical bubbles, obtained from isosurfaces of median image (liquid superficial velocity constant \( j_L = 1.5 \text{ m/s} \) and gas superficial velocity varying from \( j_G = 0.5 \text{ m/s} \) to \( 1.5 \text{ m/s} \)).
The rationale for this difference is that the median is a more robust estimate than the mean since the mean is an unbiased estimator which is influenced by the variation of the bubbles size, where extreme values do not affect the median and its result is necessarily an element of the data set, the same not being true for the mean. This results in smooth transitions in the tails of mean estimates, whereas median estimates favour sharpness.

Figure 3 also shows the superficial shapes of typical bubbles, obtained from isosurfaces of median image. The obtained estimation from ensemble mean is, in turn, better suited for the purpose of analysing the amount of small bubbles dispersed in the slug body. Systematic studies of gas bubble shape as well as the liquid slug with and without aeration can be performed with the developed methodology.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Three-dimensional data of two-phase flow generated from wire-mesh sensors contain high degree of details and may need to undergo some type of data reduction in order to provide useful information about flow phenomena. This work investigated the use of two approaches to estimate the typical bubble shape in gas-liquid slug flow. Ensemble mean and ensemble median were applied to a set of identified bubbles allowing to observe, quantitatively, changes of the bubble shape. Results show that both approaches produce similar estimations, however since median is a type of robust estimator, contours of bubbles are better defined. Three-dimensional images of typical bubbles were generated and reveal some details about bubble shape. The bubble size was also evaluated by validating the bubbles velocity and superficial gas velocity. Further studies of gas bubble shape as well as the liquid slug shape can be performed with the developed methodology.

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6. REFERENCES

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7. RESPONSIBILITY NOTICE

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