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Large-signal device simulation in time- and frequency-domain: a comparison / F. BERTAZZI; F. BONANI; S. DONATI GUERRIERI; GHIONE G.. - In: COMPEL. - ISSN 0332-1649. - Vol. 27 No. 6(2008), pp. 1319-1325.  
[10.1108/03321640810905792]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11583/1855410 since:

*Publisher:*

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*Published*

DOI:10.1108/03321640810905792

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# Large-signal device simulation in time- and frequency-domain: a comparison

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to compare the most common time- and frequency-domain numerical techniques for the determination of the steady-state solution in the physics-based simulation of a semiconductor device driven by a time-periodic generator.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The shooting and harmonic balance (HB) techniques are applied to the solution of the discretized drift-diffusion device model coupled to the external circuit embedding the semiconductor device, thus providing a fully nonlinear mixed mode simulation.

**Findings** – The comparison highlights the strong and weak points of the two approaches, basically showing that the time-domain solution is more robust with respect to the initial condition, while the HB solution provides a more rapid convergence once the initial datum is close enough to the solution itself.

**Originality/value** – The contribution compares two numerical techniques for the determination of the steady-state solution of nonlinear dynamical systems, popular in the area of RF circuit analysis but rarely applied to device simulation. In particular, this is the first application of the shooting method to forced devices.

**Keywords** Semiconductors, Modelling, Microwave transistors

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The development of high performance integrated circuits for RF and microwave systems in both conventional and innovative technologies and the optimization of their analog figures of merit (such as the noise figure in the receiver stage and the linearity and intermodulation distortion in the transmitter stage) requires, as a preliminary step, the physics-based simulation of semiconductor devices operated in linear (as in low-noise amplifiers), and nonlinear (as in power amplifiers, mixers, oscillators and frequency multipliers) conditions (Maas, 2005; Gonzalez, 1984). Nonlinear analog operation in narrowband systems is usually denoted as (quasi)-periodic large-signal (LS), meaning that the device working point varies with time according to a strictly periodic or quasi-periodic law.

Within this framework, physics-based modeling in nonlinear operation plays a fundamental role not only in technology device CAD and optimization, but also in the development of meaningful and physically sound compact models (Bonani *et al.*, 2003), mandatory for the design and optimization of complex circuits. Irrespective of the specific model aim (i.e. power saturation estimate, distortion prediction,

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This work was supported by the Italian Ministry of University and Research through the PRIN 2006 project “Non-linear models and design approaches for low-noise high dynamic range integrated radio systems”.

cyclostationary noise analysis, etc.), the first and basic step to be carried out is the computation of the steady-state solution, which, in nonlinear operation, has to include the device model(s) together with the embedding circuit. This is a critical and time-consuming step, in particular for very large circuits and for a discretized physics-based model in 2D or 3D, owing to the very large number of equations involved. Even more difficult is the determination of the working point for oscillators (autonomous case), where the oscillation period is unknown: specific algorithms have been developed for this case, like the homotopy methods (Duan and Mayaram, 2006).

The numerical techniques for the determination of the LS working point can be classified into two main categories: time- and frequency-domain techniques (see Kundert, 1999 for a recent review). In the first case, besides standard time-integration which is particularly inefficient whenever time-periodic solutions are sought for, specialized techniques have been devised; among them, the most widely exploited probably is the shooting method (Aprille and Trick, 1972; Kundert *et al.*, 1990). Frequency-domain solutions are usually based on the harmonic balance (HB) technique, wherein the problem unknowns are the (in general, complex) amplitudes of the Fourier series representing the time-periodic functions (Kundert *et al.*, 1990). Notice that the presence of distributed elements in the embedding circuit (e.g. transmission lines) favours HB with respect to time-domain solutions, since such components are much more efficiently described in the frequency domain (Kundert *et al.*, 1990).

In this paper, we focus on a comparison between the HB and shooting methods for the LS (quasi)-periodic solution under forced (non-autonomous) operation of a partial differential equation (PDE) based physical model. We exploit as the transport model the well-known drift-diffusion approach, but extension to higher-order models derived from the Boltzmann transport equation is straightforward. In the area of physics-based device modeling, LS steady-state analog simulation is comparatively recent, since a few simulators only, either academic or commercial, include it as a standard option. Concerning the solution technique, this generally is the HB approach, originally exploited in Troyanovsky *et al.* (2000) and then used also in Bonani *et al.* (2001) as a basis for the physics-based cyclostationary noise analysis in LS operation. To our best knowledge, the shooting method has been implemented for physics-based modeling in Hong *et al.* (2006) only, with reference to the study of phase noise in oscillators.

## 2. The physical model

The semiconductor device is described by a physical model linking free carrier dynamics to the terminal applied voltages (or currents). As already recalled, we use the drift-diffusion approximation (Bonani *et al.*, 2003), which, for the bipolar case (including  $N_t$  trap levels to model low-frequency dispersion effects and noise), reads:

$$\nabla^2 \phi = -\frac{q}{\varepsilon} \left( p - n - \sum_{k=1}^{N_t} n_{t,k} \right) \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{\partial n}{\partial t} = -\nabla \cdot (n\mu_n \nabla \phi - D_n \nabla n) - U_n \quad (2)$$

$$\frac{\partial p}{\partial t} = \nabla \cdot (p\mu_p \nabla \phi + D_p \nabla p) - U_p \quad (3)$$

$$\frac{\partial n_{t,k}}{\partial t} = -U_k \quad k = 1, \dots, N_t \quad (4)$$

where  $\phi$  is the electrostatic potential,  $n$  and  $p$  are the free carrier densities (electrons and holes, respectively),  $n_{t,k}$  is the concentration of electrons filling  $k$ -th trap-level,  $q$  is the (positive) electron charge,  $\nabla^2$  is the material dielectric permittivity,  $\epsilon$  is the carrier mobility and  $D$  the carrier diffusivity.  $U = R - G$  is the net recombination rate of the energy level considered,  $R$  and  $G$  are the recombination and generation rates, respectively.

For LS device simulation, the physical model equations must be solved self-consistently with the equations of the embedding circuit, thus requiring a fully mixed-mode simulation (Bonani *et al.*, 2001). After discretization, the spatially discretized PDE system and the circuit equations can be cast in the form of a differential algebraic equation system (Bonani *et al.*, 2007):

$$\frac{d\mathbf{q}(\mathbf{x})}{dt} + \mathbf{f}(\mathbf{x}, t) = 0 \quad (5)$$

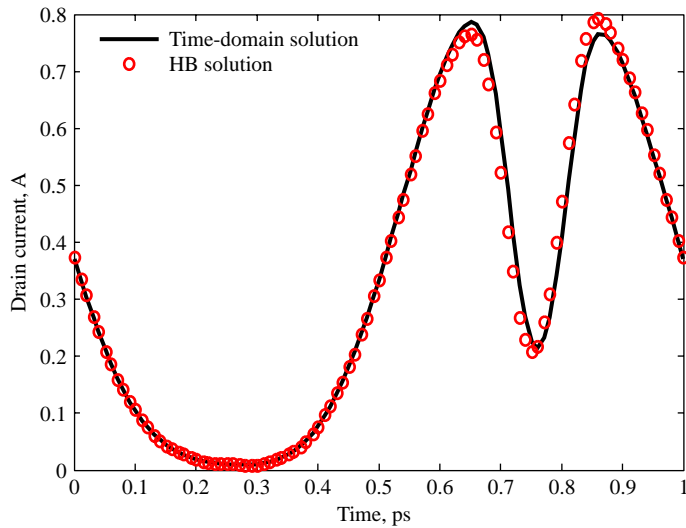
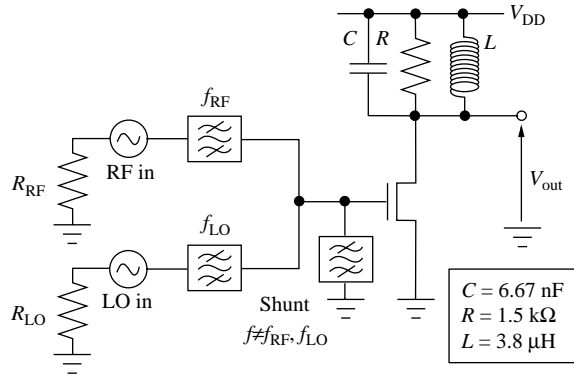
where  $\mathbf{q}$  and  $\mathbf{f}$  are nonlinear functions of their arguments,  $\mathbf{x}(t)$  is the set of unknowns, and the explicit time dependence in  $\mathbf{f}$  indicates the external, time-periodic generators present in the circuit. The size of the system is at least  $N_{\text{eq}} = (3 + N_t)N_{\text{mesh}} + 2N_c$ , where  $N_{\text{mesh}}$  is the number of mesh points for the spatial discretization of the physical model, and  $N_c$  is the number of device external contacts. Of course, if the embedding circuit is complex the number of circuit equations may grow with respect to the minimum (i.e.  $2N_c$ ), but in most cases they are negligible with respect to  $(3 + N_t)N_{\text{mesh}}$ , in particular for a 2D or 3D simulation.

A general formulation for the numerical solution of equation (5), both with HB and with the shooting method can be found in Bonani *et al.* (2007). For the case of HB, if  $N_H$  harmonics are included in the simulation (excluding DC), the system size becomes  $(2N_H + 1)N_{\text{eq}}$  (real equations). On the other hand, for the shooting method a discretization of the fundamental period  $[0; T]$  into  $N_{\text{time}}$  time intervals results into  $2(N_{\text{time}} + 1)$  successive solutions of a system of size  $N_{\text{eq}}$  (Bonani *et al.*, 2007). Of course,  $N_H$  and  $N_{\text{time}}$  are not independent, since the sampling theorem requires that to accurately represent a signal having  $N_H$  harmonics, the time samples should be at least  $2N_H + 1$ .

### 3. Case studies

To compare the time- and frequency-domain approaches, we have considered two case studies, referring to two typical RF or microwave circuits. The first is an almost ideal downconversion mixer, whose scheme is shown in Figure 1. To keep the embedding circuit simple, no input matching network was considered, while at the output a simple LC filter is included. The local oscillator (LO) frequency is 1 GHz, while the input RF is a tone at 1 GHz plus 1 MHz. The active device is a standard, epitaxial GaAs MESFET with  $0.1 \mu\text{m}$  gate length and  $100 \mu\text{m}$  gate periphery, simulated with a monopolar model (including electron velocity saturation effects) and no traps ( $N_t = 0$ ), and discretized with a mesh of  $N_{\text{mesh}} = 1,300$  points. A comparison of the time dependence of the device drain current in the working point set by a LO input tone of  $0.4 \text{ V}$  (no RF input,  $V_{\text{DD}} = 5 \text{ V}$  and  $V_{\text{GS}} = -0.3 \text{ V}$ ) is shown in Figure 2, comparing the HB and shooting solutions.

**Figure 1.**  
Circuit of the MESFET mixer case study



**Figure 2.**  
Time-dependence of the drain current for the mixer circuit

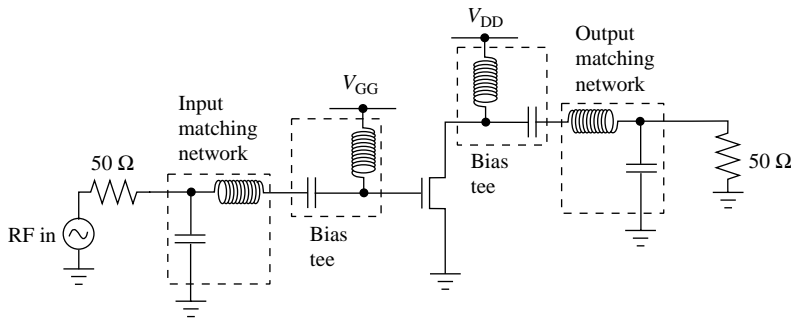
**Note:** Comparison between the time-domain and the harmonic balance solutions

In the first case,  $N_H = 10$ , while in time domain  $N_{\text{time}} = 50$ . Of course, the two solutions are in very good agreement, but the simulation time is 25 per cent lower for the shooting method.

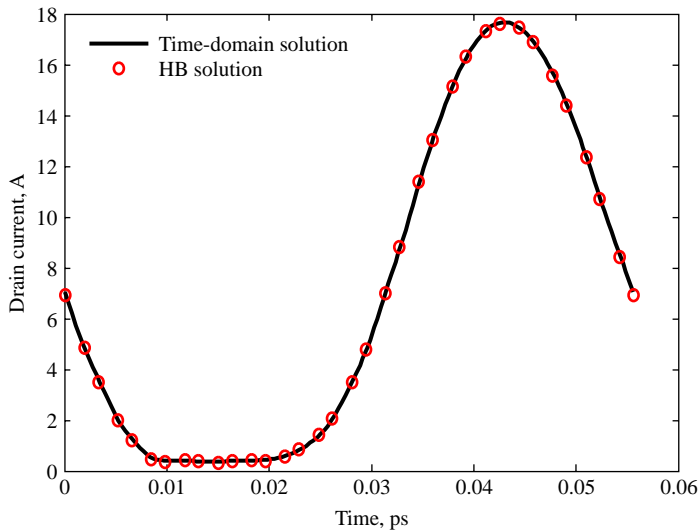
The second example is the class A power amplifier shown in Figure 3, based on a  $0.5 \mu\text{m}$  epitaxial GaAs MESFET with  $100 \mu\text{m}$  gate periphery. In this case, input and output matching networks at 18 GHz were included in the mixed mode simulation, to optimize the circuit efficiency. The device is again described by a monopolar model without traps, and  $N_{\text{mesh}} = 900$ . The bias point is set by  $V_{\text{DD}} = 7 \text{ V}$  and  $V_{\text{GG}} = -1.1 \text{ V}$ , while the input tone is 6 V. In frequency domain  $N_H = 10$ , while in time domain  $N_{\text{time}} = 80$ : the resulting drain current in the period is shown in Figure 4, and the simulation time is practically the same in the two cases.

In both examples, to attain a good accuracy in the comparison with HB  $N_{\text{time}}$  had to be chosen significantly larger than  $2N_H + 1$ , thus suggesting that frequency-domain

approaches are, at least in these cases, more accurate than the standard shooting method here implemented. For weakly nonlinear cases, such as the example of the class A power amplifier, the HB approach is efficient enough, and the simulation times are comparable to the time-domain approach. This is consistent with the behaviour observed in circuit simulations, where the trade-off between the two methodologies can be assessed as follows: the shooting method is in general less demanding in terms of the sensitivity of the convergence to the initial condition with respect to HB, meaning that even a poorer initial datum is sufficient to attain a reasonable approximation of the actual solution. On the other hand, the HB method is more precise in the sense that an accurate description of the solution itself requires a comparatively reduced number of harmonics. This seems to suggest that a credible strategy might be to use the time-domain approach to get a loose approximation of the solution, to be then fed to the HB as the initial condition to ultimately attain the required accuracy.



**Figure 3.**  
Circuit of the MESFET  
power amplifier case  
study



**Note:** Comparison between the time-domain and the harmonic balance solutions

**Figure 4.**  
Time-dependence of the  
drain current for the  
power amplifier

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper, we have compared the HB and shooting methods for the determination of the LS working point in the physics-based simulation of semiconductor devices. The problem is particularly demanding from a computational standpoint, also because a full mixed mode simulation including the embedding circuit of the device has to be carried out.

We have implemented for the first time the shooting method for the physical simulation of devices forced by LS generators, and applied this and the HB technique to the simulation of two case studies from microwave applications: a down-conversion mixer and a class A power amplifier driven in strong nonlinearity. The comparison highlights that the shooting method appears more robust from a numerical standpoint, at least for strongly nonlinear conditions, while the HB approach yields better accuracy but is significantly more sensitive to the initial condition. In conclusion, a promising strategy appears to be as follows: the shooting method with a limited number of time points is first used to attain a good initial condition for the HB method, which is then used to get an accurate determination of the working point.

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