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Lattice structures with stiffness gradient for loads transfer at bone-prosthesis interface

G. De Pasquale

Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, Politecnico di Torino, Italy.

Email: giorgio.depasquale@polito.it

Abstract. The fabrication of prostheses for orthopedic implants exploits additive technologies based on powder micromelting. The shape modularity, the biocompatibility of materials and the qualification procedures required by normative motivated the application of additive manufacturing since several years. The bone-prosthesis interface has great importance in implant integration, preventing prosthesis rejection and limiting time-scheduled prosthesis replacements. The load transfer between metal structures and bone requires precise modulation to stimulate the strength of new tissues. The design of lattice structures based on modular 3D stiffness variation is described in this paper, with special focus on the modeling methods based on homogenization approach.

I. Introduction

The performances of additive manufacturing (AM) processes support the inclusion of bulk and cellular (or lattice) regions on the same component. This peculiarity is well known in fabrication of orthopedic endoprosthesis where the main structure is connected to functional surfaces based on small features [1]. The functional coating is applied to the bone-prosthesis interface to facilitate the tissue growth and to improve the connection strength. The load transfer from the prosthesis to the bone may cause small localized displacements and wearing of the biological tissues, leading to time-scheduled replacements of the implant. The interface design requires the strong metal-bone integration and the controlled loading of the bone tissue. The second requirement can be obtained with the proper modulation of the interface structural stiffness, in order to move the loads towards the bone tissue. The spatial variation of the prosthesis structural strength must be evaluated in order to prevent the overload of the bone and to stimulate the load-driven tissue growth.

This paper introduces the application of homogenization design methods to the functional prosthesis surfaces. The parametric variation of the lattice cell topology is controlled across the interface region [2-5]. Preliminary experimental characterization is also reported with reference to SLM (selective laser melting) lattice structures made with Ti6Al4V alloy [6, 7].

II. Homogenization method

The main limitations in modeling cellular or lattice structures are caused by their geometrical complexity. The analytic formulation of lattice cells based on the equivalency with Euler-Bernoulli-Timoshenko beam theories is applicable only for the simplest cell shapes. The finite elements method (FEM) is theoretically suitable for the prediction of structural properties of lattice structures, but simplified 1D models provide limited accuracy and full 3D models suffer the extreme computational heaviness.

Homogenization methods instead are effective in reducing

the complexity of calculation and preserving high accuracy of results. They are based on the conversion of each lattice cell (or RVE, representative volume element) with equivalent elements. The equivalent homogeneous anisotropic continuum is described by elements with imposed stiffness matrix, which are able to represent the structural behavior of the original cells. The stiffness matrix is defined from the FE model results of single lattice cell in different loadings and constraints conditions. The equivalence of the two models can be computed by following different schemes, as the volume average stress-based method and the strain energy method. The periodic distribution of cells is used to impose the boundary conditions of single RVE.

The governing equation of the equivalent homogeneous material is

$$\{\sigma\} = [K]\{\varepsilon\} \quad (1)$$

where $\{\sigma\}$ and $\{\varepsilon\}$ are the stresses and strains of the equivalent homogeneous continuum. The stiffness matrix components are computed, column by column, by solving six linear static analyses. Here, the boundary conditions are imposed to provide only one non-zero component of the RVE average strain field. The non-zero average component is imposed equal to the unit and the stiffness matrix components are estimated as

$$K_{\alpha i} = \sigma_{\alpha} = \frac{1}{V} \int_V \sigma_{\alpha i}(x_1, x_2, x_3) dV \quad (2)$$

where V is the volume and $\alpha = 1, \dots, 6$ and $i = 1, \dots, 6$ correspond to the actual static case. Finally, the Young's module of the homogenized material is obtained from the compliance matrix

$$[B] = [K]^{-1} \quad (3)$$

as

$$E_1 = \frac{1}{B_{11}}, E_2 = \frac{1}{B_{22}}, E_3 = \frac{1}{B_{33}} \quad (4)$$

