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Finite element simulation of magnesium alloys laser beam welding

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Abstract

In this paper, a three-dimensional finite element model is developed to simulate thermal history magnesium-based alloys during laser beam welding. Space–time temperature distributions in weldments are predicted from the beginning of welding to the final cooling. The finite element calculations were performed using Cast3M code with which the heat equation is solved considering a non-linear transient behaviour. The applied loading is a moving heat source that depends on process parameters such as power density, laser beam dimensions and welding speed, and it is associated to moving boundary conditions. Experiments were carried out to determine temperature evolution during welding and to measure the laser weld width. By comparing the thermal model answers with the measurements, it is found that numerical simulations results are in a good agreement with the experimental data.

1. Introduction

The requirement to reduce fuel consumption and gas emission entices auto industries to replace dense materials, not only steels and cast iron alloys but even aluminium alloys, by magnesium-based alloys. Friedrich and Mordike (2006) reported that these materials have the lowest density of conventional casting metals (33% lighter than aluminium alloys), and other attractive characteristics such as excellent specific strength, good castability and recyclability.

With the increasing uses of magnesium alloys especially in automobile industry, it was important to develop assembly processes. Today, magnesium alloy components may be joined using mechanical fasteners and some welding techniques with high energy density and shielding gases to protect the metal from the oxygen action. Basically, TIG and MIG processes are the most used methods for magnesium alloys welding. However, some disadvantages of these techniques, like low welding speeds, large heat affected zone (HAZ) and high residual stress and distortion of joints, limit their uses. For these reasons, magnesium alloys weldability by innovative welding techniques, like laser beam welding (LBW), has been studied during the last decade. Dhahri et al. (2000, 2001) studied laser beam weldability of AZ91 and WE43 magnesium-based alloys. Using a CO2 laser source, they have determined welding parameters to joint 6 and 2 mm thickness sheets. Some studies recently published by Quan et al. (2008) were interested on laser welding of dissimilar magnesium alloys. Joining of magnesium-based alloys using focused laser beam is an interesting research field that is still in progress.

On the back of this, laser welding process is advantageous, it leads to small heat affected zone, deep and narrow fusion zone, high processing speed and low residual stresses and weldment distortion. But experimental investigations are long and expensive so it is important to develop numerical techniques to simulate thermal and mechanical consequences of this welding process. Numerical results can be used to explain the physics of some complex phenomena in welding process and to optimize welding parameters. Several numerical models have been developed to determine temperature profiles and stresses distribution during laser beam welding. Nevertheless, most of investigations refer to steel structural components and recently to aluminium alloys. Spina et al. (2007) established a thermo-mechanical model to predict temperature and analyse the welding parameters influence on sample displacement after cooling during AA5083 aluminium alloy laser welding. Using coupled analyses, Moraitis and Labeas (2008) modelled the laser welding of 6061 aluminium-based alloys. Considering a cone shaped keyhole as thermal source, they predicted residual stresses distribution on 2 mm thickness sheets.

To the author’s knowledge, no transient numerical analysis has been made for laser welding magnesium alloys; published investigations are limited to local problems like those proposed by Abderrazak et al. (2008, 2009a,b). In their work, they studied local
FS  laser–matter interaction time (s)
SUB density (kg m$^{-3}$)

Greek symbol
ε emissivity
Δt$_s$ time step-welding stage (s)
$\Gamma_{\text{ex}}$ external surface (mm$^2$)
$\Gamma_\varepsilon$ contact surface (mm$^2$)
$\Gamma_{\text{pl,i}}$ plasma lighted surface at i position (mm$^2$)
$\Gamma_{\text{el,i}}$ keyhole lighted surface at i position (mm$^2$)
λ thermal conductivity (W m$^{-1}$ °C$^{-1}$)
Ω volume (mm$^3$)
ρ density (kg m$^{-3}$)
τ laser–matter interaction time (s)

2. Numerical simulation model

During laser continuous wave welding process, the power density, produced by the focused beam, is very intense allowing the vaporization of metal directly under the beam. A thin hole, composed of metallic vapors is created through the welded components (Fig. 1). This one, known as keyhole, transmits the laser beam energy to metal. During weldments moving, the keyhole is maintained under the laser beam and surrounded by molten metal which is solidified after beam moving allowing the assembly of the workpieces. The keyhole is protected by a shielding gas producing the plasma that constitutes a secondary heat source. The described physical phenomena were simulated through a numerical finite element model in order to simulate thermal behaviour of laser welded samples.

2.1. Assumptions of simulation

Some simplifying assumptions were adopted for the development of the numerical model. They concern on: (i) the reduction of field study by making use of symmetry. The thermal history of only one half of the assembly was predicted. (ii) Simulation was made considering that the laser beam moves at constant speed. We have also assumed (iii) a perfect contact between the two welded parts, (iv) an uniform power distribution in the keyhole and (v) an isotropic thermal behaviour during welding.

2.2. Heat balance

The developed thermal model results from the energy balance during laser beam welding. Two treatment phases were modelled.

(1) Stage I (Fig. 2): The applied loading was the combination of laser beam power density and surface heat flow due to the plasma. Boundary conditions are convection loss flows on external surface and radiation losses in lighted laser beam surface.

(2) Stage II: After applying the laser spot, the weldments cooled on free air. During cooling, laser beam was cancelled. We considered the temperature distribution at the end of heating phase as

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**Fig. 1.** Keyhole and plasma formation during laser welding.

**Fig. 2.** Energy balance during laser welding process (stage I).
initial condition and only convection losses on external surface as boundary conditions.

2.3. Geometrical model

The geometrical model of weldment was a three-dimensional mesh modelled using cubic elements with eight nodes and quadratic elements with four nodes. To introduce a mobile heat source, mesh construction must depend on laser beam dimension and welding rate. A dense mesh was used in the area along the weld line as shown in Fig. 3. Geometry dimensions were 60 mm in length 40 mm in width and 3 mm in thickness. The built mesh is composed of 17 100 elements for 24 080 nodes (Fig. 4).

2.4. Thermal problem formulation

Heat equation resolution, in non-linear transient state with a mobile volumetric heat source, allowed the determination of the space–time temperature evolution during welding.

- During stage I, the mathematical formulation is given by:
  \[
  \Omega : \frac{\partial (\rho(T) C(T) T(x_i, t))}{\partial t} - \text{div}(\lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)) = Q = 0
  \]
  The convection and radiation limit conditions are:
  \[
  \Gamma_{p,i} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + \varepsilon \sigma(T(x_i, t))^{4} - T_{\infty}^{4} = q
  \]
  \[
  \Gamma_{\text{ext}} \setminus \Gamma_{e} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + h(T(x_i, t) - T_{\infty}) = 0
  \]
  The adiabatic condition on the contact surface is:
  \[
  \Gamma_{c} : \nabla T(x_i, t) = 0
  \]

- During stage II, mathematical formulation is given by:
  \[
  \Omega : \frac{\partial (\rho(T) C(T) T(x_i, t))}{\partial t} - \text{div}(\lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)) = 0
  \]
  The convection limits conditions are:
  \[
  \Gamma_{p,i} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + \varepsilon \sigma(T(x_i, t))^{4} - T_{\infty}^{4} = q
  \]
  \[
  \Gamma_{\text{ext}} \setminus \Gamma_{e} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + h(T(x_i, t) - T_{\infty}) = 0
  \]
  The adiabatic condition on the contact surface is:
  \[
  \Gamma_{c} : \nabla T(x_i, t) = 0
  \]

2.5. Heat sources model

In the numerical model, the thermal loading was introduced as mobile volume heat source. Based on metallurgical observations of laser beam magnesium alloys weld made by Belhadj (2009) and Dhahri et al. (2000, 2001), the formed keyhole was considered cylindrical. It was modelled by a volume density power 
\[ P_{\text{ak}} \] (Eq. (10)). In addition to the volume source, a surface density power 
\[ P_{\text{ap}} \] and plasma affected surface 
\[ P_{\text{plasma}} \] (Eq. (11)). Heat source model parameters were experimental data.

\[
Q = \frac{P_{\text{ak}}}{V_{\text{keyhole}}} = \frac{P_{\text{ak}}}{e\pi d^{2}/4}
\]
\[
q = \frac{P_{\text{ap}}}{S_{\text{plasma}}}
\]

2.7. Thermal problem resolution

Thermal problem was solved using "PASAPAS" procedure. This Cast3M operator was used by Bessrour et al. (2002) to developed transient, non-linear and incremental calculations taking into consideration conduction, convection and radiation. The numerical scheme used for heat equation resolution was an implicit

<table>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Magnesium alloy properties evolution with temperature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>( T ) (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \lambda ) (W m(^{-1}) C(^{-1}))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \rho ) (kg m(^{-3}))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( C ) (J kg(^{-1}) C(^{-1}))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial condition is:

\[
at \ t = 0 : T(x_i, 0) = T_0
\]

The convection and radiation limit conditions are:

\[
\Gamma_{p,i} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + \varepsilon \sigma(T(x_i, t))^{4} - T_{\infty}^{4} = q
\]

\[
\Gamma_{\text{ext}} \setminus \Gamma_{e} : \lambda(T) \nabla T(x_i, t)_{\text{surface}} + h(T(x_i, t) - T_{\infty}) = 0
\]

The adiabatic condition on the contact surface is:

\[
\Gamma_{c} : \nabla T(x_i, t) = 0
\]
schema with two time steps according to DUPONT2 algorithm and \( \theta \)-method for the first step.

The flow chart of Fig. 5 shows the procedure for FE calculation. The proposed numerical model simulated the whole thermal history of welded pieces laser welding and cooling. The number of laser spot positions (np = 150) depends on sample length and keyhole diameter. The time step calculation \( \Delta t \) in laser application stage, is in relation to the laser–matter interaction time given by Eq. (12):

\[
\tau = \frac{np \Delta t_s}{V} = 0.0057 \, s
\]

3. Experimental investigations

A number of welding tests were performed to optimize laser welding parameter for as-cast AM60 magnesium-based alloy. Welds were carried out using a Rofin 3 kW CW CO2 laser source generating a high quality beam (TEM01 mode). The laser beam was focused with 50 mm focal length parabolic mirror and its diameter at the focal point was \( d = 400 \mu m \).

Samples, machined in the form of 60 mm \( L \times 46 \) mm \( W \times 3 \) mm \( T \) sheets, were positioned in the fixture system (Fig. 6) and welded using helium as shielding gas (Fig. 7). Tables 2 and 3 give respectively the chemical composition of welded material and optimized welding parameters used in experimental investigations.

To record temperature evolution during laser welding process, 1 mm diameter K-type thermocouples were used. As shown in Fig. 8, thermocouples were fixed near the weld at two different distances to the centre-line \((T_1, T_2)\) and at different axial locations (location in the advancing direction of welding \( T_2, T_3 \)).

After welding, the microstructure of the different zones of the assembly was analysed using a high magnification zoom micro-
scope. Metallurgical samples were mounted by resin ground and polished using 180–1200-grit silicon carbide papers (SiC). Immediately after the last polishing step, the samples were washed with water, rinsed with methanol CH₃OH, and dried. A fine polishing was conducted using 0.5 µm oil based diamond compounds. Samples were subsequently etched with acetic glycol etchant (60 ml ethylene glycol C₂H₆O₂, 20 ml acetic acid C₂H₄O₂, 19 ml water H₂O, 1 ml HNO₃).

4. Results and discussion

As concern numerical study, results of FEM thermal model are given for 3 mm AM60 magnesium alloy sheet thickness. Processing parameters are those used for experimental investigations and specified in Table 3. For results figures, (x, y, z) point coordinates are given in mm.

Fig. 9 illustrates temperature distribution on the welded sheet at different times during stage I (Fig. 9a–d) and stage II that begins at $t=0.855\text{s}$ (Fig. 9e). The figures show that during laser beam application, there is an important thermal gradient near the keyhole but away from heat source, the weldments temperature does not change (30°C). Isotherm distribution of Fig. 9c demonstrates that the temperature, reached at the laser beam run, exceeds the AM60 magnesium alloy melting point (610°C) and falls quickly enabling the solidification of material and weldments assembly. Plasma effect is noted by a larger fusion zone width on the weldment top surface where the heat input is elevated.

![Fig. 9. Isotherm evolution during laser application (a–d) and cooling (e–h).](image-url)
Fig. 10 shows simulated temperature evolutions according time, in five points A–E at different positions from weld centre-lines, since the beginning of welding until thermal balance. It can be noted that heating and cooling rates are important during laser application stage whereas during cooling, heat flow is lower.

Using temperature evolution according time, heating and quenching rate are calculated for five points situated on the molten zone (points F and G) and near laser–matter interaction surface (points H–J). According to Fig. 11, predicted quenching rate on the melting zone exceeded 10^4 °C/s. This result is in accordance with those of Liu et al. (2005).

For experimental investigations, results concern temperature measurements during welding and weld metallurgical observations.

Fig. 12 gives K-thermocouple measured temperature during laser beam welding. The temperature evolutions according time are given for three specific points of weldment T1, T2 and T3 representing the thermocouple position (Fig. 8). From measured evolution, we can note there are two stages of the process: the heating one for which the heating rate is important compared to quenching rate during cooling stage.

Fig. 11. Predicted heating and cooling rates evolution during laser welding.

The metallurgical properties of laser welded joint, obtained by process parameter given in Table 3, were investigated. Transversal weld macrograph of Fig. 13b shows that, after magnesium alloy laser welding, noticeable change in microstructure occurred. Two principal zones were present: the fusion zone (FZ) and the base metal (BM). A very small heat affected zone (HAZ), with 90 μm in width, was detected on weld microstructure presented in Fig. 13c. The molten zone was characterized by a dendritic microstructure. Liu et al. (2005) had observed this structure with high solidification rate of as-cast magnesium alloys melded by laser radiation.

Experimental investigations, presented above, were used to calibrate and to validate numerical results in terms of temperature evolution and weld geometrical characteristics.

According to Fig. 14, the comparison of the finite element simulated temperature evolution and those measured by thermocouples reveals a satisfactory agreement between numerical and experimental results.
mental results. The same thermal behaviour is noted during heating step. However, we can notice temperature value differences after the laser beam run. This difference can be due to considered hypothesis in the definition of the convective condition during cooling and some error calculation due to the lack of information concerning material properties especially at high temperature.

The comparison of simulated molten zone form and dimension with those determined by metallurgical investigations are presented in Figs. 15 and 16. Isotherm evolutions near heat source were compared to transversal weld macrographs (Fig. 15). With 3 kW laser power and 4.2 m/min welding rate, the measured weld width was between 0.6 and 1 mm. On the other hand, the simulated molten zone detected by melting temperature was about 0.9 mm. Similar solidification profiles on the weldment top surface were noted comparing simulated temperature distribution near heat source and molten zone morphology (Fig. 16).

5. Conclusion

A 3D finite element model has been developed to simulate the thermal history during laser welding of AM60 magnesium-based alloy thin plates. The non-linear transient calculation was performed using the CAST3M FE code. The suggested model gave the possibility to determine at every treatment time step, the temperature fields on weldments from the beginning of welding until the return to thermal balance. Instantaneous temperatures and heating and cooling rates evolutions according time were also determined in many meshwork points. Experimental studies were conducted to validate numerical model simulations. The temperature measurement results and metallurgical investigations were in good agreement with thermal model upshots. Temperature fields at various time steps, resulting from the developed model, will be used as input on the mechanical analysis of magnesium alloys laser beam welding process.

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