Numerical Analysis of Current Attachment at Thermionic Cathode for Gas Tungsten Arc at Atmospheric Pressure†

YAMAMOTO Kentaro*, TASHIRO Shinichi** and TANAKA Manabu***

Abstract

In a gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure, electrons are emitted from a thermionic cathode of the tungsten electrode, of which the work function would be reduced by generally adding an emitter material such as thorium oxide (ThO₂), lanthanum oxide (La₂O₃), and so on. However, there is still a lack of practical understanding of the physical behavior in the electrode region. For example, current attachment at a thermionic cathode is not yet clear. The present paper presents a methodology for predicting the current attachment at a thermionic cathode for the gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure in argon. It is suggested that the current attachment at thermionic cathode is dependent on work function, melting point and the Richardson constant of emitter materials.

KEY WORDS: (Numerical simulation), (Gas tungsten arc), (Cathode)

1. Introduction

In gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure, electrons are emitted from a thermionic cathode of the tungsten electrode, of which the work function would be reduced by generally adding an emitter material such as thorium oxide (ThO₂), lanthanum oxide (La₂O₃), and so on 1). However, there is still a lack of practical understanding of the physical behavior in the electrode region. For example, current attachment at thermionic cathode is not yet clear. The emitter materials such as ThO₂, La₂O₃, etc would not only affect work function of the cathode but also current attachment at the cathode. The current attachment at the cathode affects the plasma state of the arc column due to change in the cathode jet induced by the Lorentz force at the cathode region 1, 2). It is well known that arc flames are dependent on the kinds of emitter materials which are added to the tungsten electrode. Welders, for example, suggest that a W-ThO₂ electrode produces a hard arc flame but a W-La₂O₃ electrode produces a soft arc one 3). The present paper presents a methodology for predicting the current attachment at a thermionic cathode for gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure in argon. We use a numerical model of a gas tungsten arc where the arc and its electrodes are treated as a unified system.

2. A unified model

The tungsten cathode, arc plasma and anode are described relative to a cylindrical coordinate, assuming rotational symmetry around the arc axis. The calculation domain is shown in Fig. 1. The flow is assumed to be laminar, and the arc plasma is assumed to be in local thermodynamic equilibrium (LTE). The diameter of the tungsten cathode is 3.2 mm with a 60 degrees conical tip. The anode is assumed to be water-cooled copper and its diameter is 50 mm with 10 mm in thickness.

The mass continuity equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} (r \rho v_r) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} (\rho v_z) = 0
\]  

(1)

the radial momentum conservation equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r \rho v_r^2 \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} (\rho v_r v_z) = \frac{\partial P}{\partial r} - j B_z
\]

\[+ \frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} (2 \eta \frac{\partial v_r}{\partial r}) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} (\eta \frac{\partial v_r}{\partial z} + \eta v_z) - 2 \eta v_z^2
\]  

(2)
Numerical Analysis of Current Attachment at Thermionic Cathode for Gas Tungsten Arc at Atmospheric Pressure

the axial momentum conservation equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r \rho v_r v_z \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( \rho v_z^2 \right) = - \frac{\partial P}{\partial z} + j_z B_\theta \\
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( \rho v_r^2 \right) + \frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( \rho \nu \frac{\partial v_r}{\partial r} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( \rho \nu \frac{\partial v_r}{\partial z} \right)
\]  

(3)

the energy conservation equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r \rho h v_z \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( \rho c_p h v_z \right) = \frac{1}{c_p} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( \rho c_p h v_z \right) + \frac{1}{c_p} \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( \rho c_p h v_z \right)
\]  

(4)

the current continuity equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r j_r \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( j_z \right) = 0
\]  

(5)

and the Ohm's law (6) is

\[
j_i = -\sigma E_i; j_e = -\sigma E_i
\]  

(6)

and Maxwell's equation is

\[
\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r B_\theta \right) = \mu_0 j_z
\]  

(7)

where \( t \) is time, \( h \) is enthalpy, \( P \) is pressure, \( v_r \) and \( v_z \) are the radial and axial velocities, \( j_r \) and \( j_z \) are the radial and axial components of the current density, \( g \) is the acceleration due to gravity, \( \kappa \) is the thermal conductivity, \( c_p \) is the specific heat, \( \rho \) is the density, \( \eta \) is the viscosity, \( U \) is the radiation emission coefficient, \( \sigma \) is the electrical conductivity, \( B_\theta \) is the azimuthal magnetic field, \( \mu_0 \) is the permeability of free space, \( E_i \) and \( E_z \) are respectively the radial and axial components of the electric field defined by \( E_i = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial r} \) and \( E_z = -\frac{\partial V}{\partial z} \), where \( V \) is electric potential. Calculations at points on both electrode surfaces would need to include the special process occurring at the surfaces. Thus, additional energy flux terms need to be included in equation (4) at each electrode surface for thermionic heating and cooling from the electrons, ion heating, and radiation cooling. The additional energy flux for the cathode \( H_K \) and for the anode \( H_A \) are

\[
\text{Cathode } H_K = -\epsilon \alpha T^4 [j_i] \phi_K + |j| V_i
\]  

(8)

\[
\text{Anode } H_A = -\epsilon \alpha T^4 |j| \phi_A
\]  

(9)

respectively. Here \( \epsilon \) is the surface emissivity, \( \alpha \) is the Stefan-Boltzmann constant, \( \phi_K \) is the work function of the tungsten cathode, \( \phi_A \) is the work function of the anode, \( V_i \) is the ionization potential of helium, \( j_e \) is the electron current density, and \( j_i \) is the ion current density. We calculate the electron saturation current density at the cathode surface by thermionic emission of electrons \( j_R \) from the Richardson-Dushman equation. The ion current density \( j_i \) is then assumed to be \( |j|<|j_R| \) if \( |j| \) is greater than \( |j| \); where \( |j| \) is the total current density at the cathode surface obtained from equation. The detailed boundary conditions and numerical method are given in our previous paper 4. Within both electrodes, we set \( v_r=v_z=0 \). The temperatures at boundaries CD, DE, EF, and FA in Fig. 1 are taken to be the same room temperature, namely, 300 K. The electric potential is set to zero at the base of the anode, CD, in Fig. 1. In order to avoid the problem that the equilibrium electrical conductivity is effectively zero in the plasma close to the electrodes owing to the low plasma temperature, we employ an LTE-diffusion approximation 5). The differential equations (1) to (7) are solved iteratively by the SIMPLEC numerical procedure 6) for the whole region of the arc welding process.

3. Treatment of current attachment

The in-situ measurements of work function of a cathode in the argon gas tungsten arc during operation at atmospheric pressure were carried out simultaneously with measurements of surface temperature of the cathode 7). This technique was based on the photoelectric effect at the surface of the tungsten cathode with the use of a pulse laser system. The effective work functions of pure W, W-2% ThO2 and W-2% La2O3 electrodes during operation at a current of 200 A were 4.6 eV, 2.8 eV and 3.0 eV from the in-situ measurements. These results were very close to the work functions of W, ThO2 and La2O3.
as pure materials obtained from the literature. Therefore, it was concluded that the effective work function of tungsten electrodes adding an emitter material, namely, ThO$_2$ or La$_2$O$_3$, was dominated by the work function of the emitter material even though its addition to the electrode was only 2% in weight. From our previous study, we have our image of current attachment at thermionic cathode, as follows. (a) Emitter material plays a role of thermionic emission of electrons due to its lower work function independently of its conditions, namely, solid or liquid. (b) Tungsten weakly contributes to thermionic emission of electrons due to its higher work function. (c) Emitter material below its melting point is scattered on the surface of tungsten, as shown in Fig. 2. A size of an emitter material is around 5 μm. The emitter material practically covers about 5% of the tungsten surface because 2 wt% of ThO$_2$ and La$_2$O$_3$ becomes 4 to 6 vol% of ThO$_2$ and La$_2$O$_3$. (d) Emitter material above its melting point covers the whole surface of tungsten. In order to evaluate the current attachment, the space-charge sheath at the cathode surface has to be regularly calculated with thermionic emission of electrons. However, our unified model does not take the sheath into account. Therefore, for simplification, we assume that the role of thermionic emission of electrons by emitter material is replaced with the electrical conductivity of arc plasma on the cathode surface, as shown in Fig. 3. If surface temperature of the cathode is lower than the melting point of the emitter material, the electrical conductivity of the arc plasma on the cathode surface is assumed to be a regular value independently of temperature because the emitter material covers the whole surface of tungsten. If surface temperature of the cathode is higher than the melting point of the emitter material, the electrical conductivity of the arc plasma in one mesh neighboring on the cathode surface is assumed to be 5% of the regular value because the emitter material practically covers about 5% of the tungsten surface. The flux of arc current from one mesh to another mesh is roughly represented by $I = S(\sigma E)$, where $S$ is the area between two meshes. We assume to replace 5%$S$ by 5%$\sigma$.

Three types of tungsten electrode, namely, W-2% ThO$_2$, W-2% La$_2$O$_3$ and W-2% CeO$_2$ are calculated in this paper. The numerical values given to a unified model are tabulated in Table 1. These values are from the literature. In the manufacturing process of a tungsten electrode, CeO$_2$ is reduced to Ce$_2$O$_3$ after sintering in pure hydrogen atmosphere, and then we also assume that the whole CeO$_2$ of W-2% CeO$_2$ electrode is changed to Ce$_2$O$_3$ in this paper.

**Table 1** Numerical values given to a unified model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emitter</th>
<th>$\phi$ (eV)</th>
<th>M.P. (K)</th>
<th>A (A/cm$^2$K$^2$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3653</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ThO$_2$</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3323</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2490</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ce$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CeO$_2$ is reduced to Ce$_2$O$_3$ after sintering in H$_2$ atmosphere.*
4. Results and discussion

Figure 4 shows two-dimensional temperatures and fluid flow velocities of gas tungsten arcs for various kinds of electrodes at 200 A of arc current and 5 mm of arc length. These calculations were made for the steady state. The difference between calculated arc voltages for various electrodes is negligible and the value of the arc voltage is about 11.2 V. This tendency was pointed out by experiments \(^1\). However, the plasma state of the arc column is locally affected by the electrode types. Specifically, the maximum temperature of arc plasma close to the cathode tip for W-2% ThO\(_2\) reaches 19,000 K and it is the highest value in comparison with the other temperatures for W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and W-2% CeO\(_2\), because the current attachment at the cathode tip is constricted by a centralized limitation of liquid area of ThO\(_2\) due to its higher melting point. This higher temperature of the plasma close to the cathode tip at the arc axis would play an important role in the production of a hard arc flame. In cases of W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and W-2% CeO\(_2\), the liquid areas of La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and CeO\(_2\) are widely expanded at the cathode tip due to their lower melting points and then produce uniform current attachments at the cathode, resulting a soft arc flame.

Figure 5 shows temperature distributions at electrode surfaces. The maximum temperatures at the tip are 3776 K, 3620 K and 3210 K for W-2% ThO\(_2\), W-2% CeO\(_2\) and W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\), respectively. These are good agreement with experimental results reported by Haidar and Farmer \(^2\). The tip temperature of W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) during operation is clearly lower than that of W-2% CeO\(_2\) although both work functions of La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and CeO\(_2\) are almost the same as shown in Table 1. This reason is deduced from a difference of the Richardson constant between 96.0 A/cm\(^2\)K\(^2\) in La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and 30.0 A/cm\(^2\)K\(^2\) in CeO\(_2\). Figure 6 shows arc pressure distributions at the anode surface. The maximum arc pressure for W-2% CeO\(_2\) reaches 395 Pa and then it is similar to 391 Pa for W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\). However, the maximum arc pressure for W-2% ThO\(_2\) is clearly lower than these. Sadek measured arc pressure distributions at a water-cooled copper anode by a semiconductor transducer, as shown in Fig. 7 \(^1\). Since he, unfortunately, employed 45 degree for the conical tip angle of tungsten electrode and 3 mm for the arc length, we can not compare both results of experiment and calculation directly. However, his experimental results show that the maximum arc pressures of W-2% CeO\(_2\) and W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) are almost the same but that for W-2% ThO\(_2\) is clearly lower than these. This tendency is very similar to the tendency given by calculations as shown in Fig. 6, although the absolute values of arc pressure in both cases are different due to differences of a few conditions as stated above. Figure 8 shows current density distributions at 0 mm of axial distance in Fig. 1. The maximum current density for W-2% ThO\(_2\) is the highest in comparison with those for W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and W-2% CeO\(_2\). However, the current density for W-2% ThO\(_2\) drastically decreases toward the radius and then it is lower than those for W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and W-2% CeO\(_2\) at around 0.5 mm to 2 mm in the radius. This characteristic of current density distribution for W-2% ThO\(_2\) locally leads to the highest values in the tip temperature of the cathode, in the temperature of the arc plasma and in the fluid flow velocity of the cathode jet, but it produces the lowest value of the arc pressure at the anode surface because an average momentum of the cathode jet for W-2% ThO\(_2\) is smaller than those for the other two electrodes due to more uniform current density distributions for W-2% La\(_2\)O\(_3\) and W-2% CeO\(_2\) than that for W-2% ThO\(_2\), as shown in Fig. 8. From the above results, it can be concluded that the current attachment at thermionic cathode for gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure is dependent on work function, melting point and the Richardson constant of emitter materials.
Fig. 6  Arc pressures at anode surface.

Fig. 7  Experimental results of arc pressure at anode surface 1).

Fig. 8  Current density distributions at the tip of tungsten electrode.

4. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are summarized as follows.

(1) Study of the current attachment at the thermionic cathode for a gas tungsten arc at atmospheric pressure was examined from numerical calculations of an arc-electrode unified model.

(2) It is suggested that the current attachment at the thermionic cathode was dependent on work function, melting point and the Richardson constant of emitter materials.

(3) The maximum temperature of arc plasma close to the cathode tip for W-2% ThO$_2$ reached 19,000 K and it was the highest value in comparison with the other temperatures for W-2% La$_2$O$_3$ and W-2% CeO$_2$, because the current attachment at the cathode tip was constricted by a centralized limitation of liquid area of ThO$_2$ due to its higher melting point. This higher temperature of plasma close to the cathode tip at the arc axis would play an important role in production of a hard arc flame.

(4) In the cases of W-2% La$_2$O$_3$ and W-2% CeO$_2$, the liquid areas of La$_2$O$_3$ and Ce$_2$O$_3$ were widely expanded at the cathode tip due to their lower melting points and which then produce uniform current attachments at the cathode, resulting a soft arc flame.

(5) The tip temperature of W-2% La$_2$O$_3$ during operation was clearly lower than that of W-2% CeO$_2$ although both work functions of La$_2$O$_3$ and Ce$_2$O$_3$ were almost the same. This reason was deduced from a difference of the Richardson constant between 96.0 A/cm$^2$K$^2$ in La$_2$O$_3$ and 30.0 A/cm$^2$K$^2$ in Ce$_2$O$_3$.

References

3) Mita T; private communication, 2006.