Optimal Control for Maximizing Link Velocity of Robotic Variable Stiffness Joints

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Abstract: In this paper we evaluate the potential of Variable Stiffness Actuation to utilize its inherent joint elasticity and capability to adjust the intrinsic joint stiffness. These abilities make it possible to realize fundamentally different motion control schemes in comparison to intrinsically stiff robots. In this paper we treat the problem of how to generate optimally fast link side velocity at a certain time instant by fully exploiting the elastic energy transfer effects between motor, joint elasticity, stiffness adjustment mechanism, and link. Based on optimal control theory we show that it is possible to significantly and optimally exceed the motor maximum velocity by appropriate motor commands. We solve the problem for models of increasing complexity in order to consecutively elaborate the core insights into the chosen problem. Finally, we present experimental results with a VIA joint prototype, confirming the correctness of the developed formalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Classical articulated robots are characterized by stiff actuation with structural elastic effects being certainly unwanted. Position accuracy and repeatability are the goals that are aimed for. If compliance is desired it is realized via active control, leading to such sophisticated solutions as for the DLR Lightweight Robot III, Albu-Schäffer et al. [2007]. The robot utilizes integrated joint torque sensors to realize e.g. high-performance Cartesian impedance control above a full state feedback controller for joint vibration damping. However, recently elastic joints received increasing attention as several interesting properties are achieved, if significant intrinsic compliance is incorporated into the design. A general argument in favor of intrinsic joint compliance, apart from its role for joint protection from impact shocks, is its ability to store and release energy

(1) for decreasing the energy consumption of the system or
(2) to increase peak power output.

The former has received larger attention especially for biped walking, Yamaguchi et al. [1998a,b], Vanderborght et al. [2006]. Our focus, however, lies on the latter as it allows to considerably increase the link speed above motor speed level Schempf et al. [1995], Paluska and Herr [2006], Okada et al. [2002], Haddadin et al. [2007], Wolf and Hirzinger [2008]. In most cases constant joint elasticity is used (Series Elastic Actuation (SEA)), however, recently also the concept of Variable Impedance Actuation (VIA), which can be considered as an extension of SEA has drawn large attention. The principle of VIA is truly human-inspired in the sense that it intends to approach the impedance adjustment capabilities of the human musculoskeletal system. In humans all muscles work in pairs,

namely the agonist and the antagonist. For transferring this design idea to robotic actuation there are numerous concrete concepts. An overview is e.g. given in van Ham et al. [2009]. However, their main characteristic is the need for a second actuator per DoF. Together with a nonlinear spring characteristic this enables the desired stiffness adjustment (only very few are capable of damping variation). How exactly the two actuators contribute to the equilibrium position motion and stiffness adjustment depends on the particular design. Typically, they are either equally affecting both (e.g. antagonism) or one actuator is responsible for driving the equilibrium point, while the second one, which is typically much smaller (e.g. Variable Stiffness or Quasi-Antagonism mechanisms), alters the joint elasticity characteristic. At DLR we developed an integrated hand arm system, Grebenstein et al. [2011] that is fully equipped with variable impedance actuation, c.f. Fig.1.
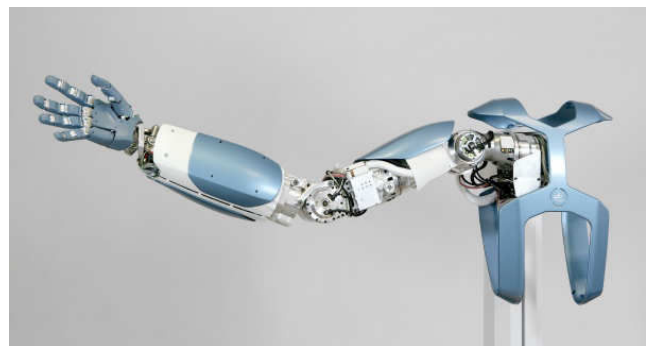

Fig. 1. The DLR hand arm system.

As already mentioned the unique characteristic of VIA is an intrinsically variable impedance element between actuator and link, c.f. Fig 2. The elastic joint torque $\tau_J(\varphi, \sigma_1, \sigma_2)$ between motor inertia B (associated with
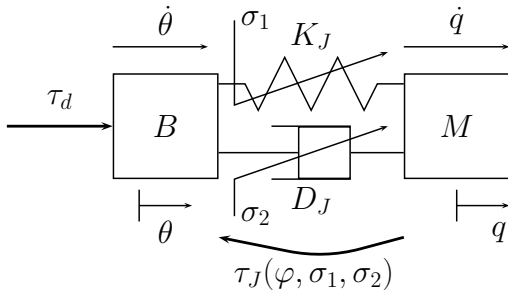
Fig. 2. 1-DoF model of a VIA joint.

motor position θ) and link inertia M (associated with link position q) is in general a function of the elastic deflection $\varphi = \theta - q$, as well as of the stiffness and damper actuation variables σ_1, σ_2. The desired motor torque is denoted as τ_d.

As the mechanical complexity and capabilities of such joints are significantly different from classical stiff ones, there are still numerous open problems. One of the most remarkable properties of VIA is that the elastic joint element can be used to store and release energy by appropriate excitation. It is therefore fundamental to analyze how this property can be used for generating motions that take advantage of this and significantly enhance the capabilities of VIA robots in comparison with their stiff counterparts. Recently, it was shown experimentally that it is possible to design VIA motions such that the link side velocity can significantly exceed the maximum motor velocity, Wolf and Hirzinger [2008]. This is especially useful for achieving human like peak performance by means of maximum speed [1].

In this paper we develop the theory to maximize the link side velocity of a variable impedance joint and verify the results experimentally. For solving this problem, we use methods from optimal control theory. In order to systematically analyze the different effects and constraints we increase the complexity of the used models and try to find analytical solutions if possible. Table 1 depicts the consecutive steps we have made and points out whether analytical or numerical solutions were obtained. First, the constant stiffness case (case A) is solved with different motor models (case B+C+D). Then, the presence of bounds on the state variables (case E) is incorporated, the influence of adjusting the stiffness (case F+G) is anlayzed, and finally experimental results on the DLR QA-Joint (case H) are discussed. Each step contributes particular insights, as e.g. the influence of constrained motor dynamics, constraints on the elastic deflection, or stiffness adjustment, which makes it possible to formulate a full view on the problem. As mechanical damping is usually unwanted due to energetic arguments, most VIA implementations realize damping via active control and not through a mechanically complex solution. Therefore, we do not consider damping in this paper, i.e. $D_J = 0$. Furthermore, we assume $K_J = \sigma_1$ for the theoretical analysis in order to keep it clear for the reader. Therefore, we use only σ to denote the stiffness actuation variable from now on. However, for a real joint typically there exists a possibly nonlinear relation between the actuator variable

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[1] Extreme examples show that humans are capable of generating enormous joint speeds as e.g. shoulder rotation of $6.900 - 9800$ $°/s$ during a baseball pitch of a professional pitcher Herman [2007]. This speed range is currently not realizable by robots if the torque range and the weight of the joint should be also compatible with human values.

σ and the concrete joint stiffness K_J. We will give such an example in Sec. 6.

2. PROBLEM FORMULATION

As we assume systems which state space equations do not explicitly depend on time, the description of their dynamics is a system of differential equations of first order.

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}(t) = f(\mathbf{x}(t), \mathbf{u}(t)), \tag{1}$$

with $\mathbf{x}$ and $\mathbf{u}$ being the state vector and control input, respectively. For achieving an optimal control input, a general optimality criterion is usually to be chosen such that the timely evolution of $\mathbf{x}(t)$ and $\mathbf{u}(t)$, as well as the final state of the system $\mathbf{x}(t_f)$ are weighted with respect to each other. Therefore, an integral cost functional is a reasonable choice, as it weighs the final state with the function h and the timely evolution of the state and control input with integrating the function g.

$$J = h(\mathbf{x}(t_f), t_f) + \int_0^{t_f} g(\mathbf{x}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t) \, \mathrm{d}t \tag{2}$$

Together with the Hamiltonian

$$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t) = g(\mathbf{x}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t) + \boldsymbol{\lambda}^T f(\mathbf{x}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t) \tag{3}$$

the constrained optimization problem is transformed into a problem without constraints. However, in order to maximize the link side velocity at a certain time instant t_f only, (2) reduces to:

$$J = h(\mathbf{x}(t_f), t_f)) = \dot{q}(t_f) \tag{4}$$

Since no other constraints are taken into consideration (3) reduces to

$$H(\mathbf{x}, \boldsymbol{\lambda}, \mathbf{u}, t) = \boldsymbol{\lambda}^T f(\mathbf{x}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t). \tag{5}$$

For the optimization of the final state the boundary conditions of the adjoint equations result from the transversal condition

$$\boldsymbol{\lambda}(t_f) = \frac{\partial h(t_f)}{\partial \mathbf{x}}. \tag{6}$$

Together with the initial boundary conditions of the state space equation and the final boundary conditions of the adjoint equations this leads to a two point boundary problem. The partial derivatives of the Hamiltonian with regard to the state and co-states define a canonical system of differential equations that needs to be solved:

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}} = \frac{\partial H}{\partial \boldsymbol{\lambda}} \tag{7}$$

$$\dot{\boldsymbol{\lambda}} = -\frac{\partial H}{\partial \mathbf{x}} \tag{8}$$

In the next section we analyze models of increasing complexity in order to elaborate the fundamental aspects about optimizing the link side velocity at a certain time instant t_f.

3. OPTIMAL CONTROL FOR LINEAR CASES

In this section we treat the constant elasticity case ($K_J =$ const.). Stiffness adjustment and other nonlinear effects are discussed in Sec. 4 and Sec. 5. For the first model the

case	model	solution	achieved insights
A	Velocity source + SEA	analytical	principal effect of significant joint elasticity
B	PT1 + SEA	analytical	influence of constrained motor dynamics, 1st order
C	PT2 + SEA	analytical	influence of constrained motor dynamics, 2nd order
D	PT2 + SEA + JTF	numerical	influence of joint torque feedback on motor inertia
E	PT2 + SEA + JTF + CD	numerical	influence of deflection constraints
F	Velocity source + VS	analytical	principle effect of stiffness adjustment
G	Velocity source + VS + CD	numerical	influence of stiffness adjustment and constrained deflection
H	PT2 + VS + CMT	numerical	real VIA design behavior and constrained motor torque

Table 1. Analyzed models (SEA= Series Elastic Actuation, JTF = joint torque feedback, CD = constrained deflection, VS = variable stiffness, CMT = constrained motor torque).

	Vel. source (A)	PT1 (B)	PT2 (C)	PT2+τ_J (D)
1	$\theta = \int_0^{t_f} \dot{\theta}_d \, dt$ $M\ddot{q} = K_J(\theta - q)$	$\tau_m = K_P(\dot{\theta}_d - \dot{\theta})$ $\tau_m = B\ddot{\theta}$ $M\ddot{q} = K_J(\theta - q)$	$\tau_m = K_D(\dot{\theta}_d - \dot{\theta}) + K_P(\theta_d - \theta)$ $\tau_m = B\ddot{\theta}$ $M\ddot{q} = K_J(\theta - q)$	$\tau_m = K_D(\dot{\theta}_d - \dot{\theta}) + K_P(\theta_d - \theta)$ $\tau_m = B\ddot{\theta} + K_J(\theta - q)$ $M\ddot{q} = K_J(\theta - q)$
2	$\mathbf{x}^T = [\theta \; q \; \dot{q}]$ $u = \dot{\theta}_d$	$\mathbf{x}^T = [\theta \; \dot{\theta} \; q \; \dot{q}]$ $u = \dot{\theta}_d$	$\mathbf{x}^T = [\theta_d \; \theta \; \dot{\theta} \; q \; \dot{q}]$ $u = \dot{\theta}_d$	$\mathbf{x}^T = [\theta_d \; \theta \; \dot{\theta} \; q \; \dot{q}]$ $u = \dot{\theta}_d$
3	$\dot{x}_1 = u$ $\dot{x}_2 = x_3$ $\dot{x}_3 = \omega^2(x_1 - x_2)$	$\dot{x}_1 = x_2$ $\dot{x}_2 = \frac{K_P}{B}(u - x_2)$ $\dot{x}_3 = x_4$ $\dot{x}_4 = \omega^2(x_1 - x_3)$	$\dot{x}_1 = u$ $\dot{x}_2 = x_3$ $\dot{x}_3 = \frac{1}{B}(K_D(u - x_3) + K_P(x_1 - x_2))$ $\dot{x}_4 = x_5$ $\dot{x}_5 = \omega^2(x_2 - x_4)$	$\dot{x}_1 = u$ $\dot{x}_2 = x_3$ $\dot{x}_3 = \frac{1}{B}(K_D(u - x_3) + K_P(x_1 - x_2) - K_J(x_2 - x_4))$ $\dot{x}_4 = x_5$ $\dot{x}_5 = \omega^2(x_2 - x_4)$
4	$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), u(t), t) =$ $\lambda_1 u + \lambda_2 x_3 + \lambda_3 \omega^2(x_1 - x_2)$	$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), u(t), t) = \lambda_1 x_2 +$ $+\lambda_2 \frac{K_P}{B}(u - x_2) + \lambda_3 x_4 + \lambda_4 \omega^2(x_1 - x_3)$	$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \lambda(t), u(t)) = \lambda_1 u + \lambda_2 x_3$ $+\lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}(K_D(u - x_3) + K_P(x_1 - x_2)) +$ $+\lambda_4 x_5 + \lambda_5 \omega^2(x_2 - x_4)$	$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \lambda(t), u(t)) = \lambda_1 u + \lambda_2 x_3$ $+\lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}(K_D(u - x_3) +$ $+K_P(x_1 - x_2) - K_J(x_2 - x_4)) +$ $+\lambda_4 x_5 + \lambda_5 \omega^2(x_2 - x_4)$
5	$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_3 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_2 = \lambda_3 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_3 = -\lambda_2$	$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_4 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_2 = -\lambda_1 + \frac{K_P}{B}\lambda_2$ $\dot{\lambda}_3 = \lambda_4 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_4 = -\lambda_3$	$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_3 \frac{K_P}{B}$ $\dot{\lambda}_2 = \lambda_3 \frac{K_P}{B} - \lambda_5 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_3 = -\lambda_2 + \lambda_3 \frac{K_D}{B}$ $\dot{\lambda}_4 = \lambda_5 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_5 = -\lambda_4$	$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_3 \frac{K_P}{B}$ $\dot{\lambda}_2 = \lambda_3 \left(\frac{K_P}{B} + \frac{K_J}{B}\right) - \lambda_5 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_3 = -\lambda_2 + \lambda_3 \frac{K_D}{B}$ $\dot{\lambda}_4 = -\lambda_3 \frac{K_J}{B} + \lambda_5 \omega^2$ $\dot{\lambda}_5 = -\lambda_4$
6	$\boldsymbol{\lambda}^T(t_f) = [0 \; 0 \; 1]$ $\mathbf{x}^T(0) = [0 \; 0 \; 0]$	$\boldsymbol{\lambda}^T(t_f) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 1]$ $\mathbf{x}^T(0) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0]$	$\boldsymbol{\lambda}^T(t_f) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 1]$ $\mathbf{x}^T(0) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0]$	$\boldsymbol{\lambda}^T(t_f) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 1]$ $\mathbf{x}^T(0) = [0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0 \; 0]$
7	$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \begin{cases} \dot{\theta}_{\max}, & \lambda_1 > 0 \\ \dot{\theta}_{\min}, & \lambda_1 < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_1 = 0 \end{cases}$	$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \begin{cases} \dot{\theta}_{\max}, & \lambda_2 > 0 \\ \dot{\theta}_{\min}, & \lambda_2 < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_2 = 0 \end{cases}$	$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \begin{cases} \dot{\theta}_{\max}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 > 0 \\ \dot{\theta}_{\min}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 = 0 \end{cases}$	$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \begin{cases} \dot{\theta}_{\max}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 > 0 \\ \dot{\theta}_{\min}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B}\lambda_3 = 0 \end{cases}$

Table 2. Summary of the investigated linear optimal control problems.

motor behaves as a velocity source, which gives insight into the principles of utilizing joint elasticity. In order to investigate the influence of motor dynamics on the switching trajectory, we then consider the motor to be position controlled. We investigate both PT1 and PT2 behavior for the controlled motor. In a first step we neglect the influence of the elastic joint torque feedback on the motor inertia as this allows to find a closed solution [2]. Finally, the feedback of the elastic joint torque is also considered. The actuating variable u is chosen to be the desired motor speed $\dot{\theta}_d$. The proportional and damping gain values for the motor controller are denoted as K_P and K_D, respectively.

As the principal approach is always the same we summarized the relevant equations and conditions for the interested reader in Tab. 2 and focus only on the most significant general insights in the following description. Table 2 lists the system dynamics (1), the state and input vector (2), the state space equations (3), the Hamiltonian (4), the adjoint system (5), the boundary conditions (6), and the solution of the switching system (7). The eigenfrequency is denoted as $\omega = \sqrt{K_J/M}$.

Since all system equations (row 3) are linear in u, the Pontryagin maximum principle leads to bang-bang control. The optimal switching functions are the terms of the particular Hamilton (row 4) that linearly depend on u.

[2] Please note that the stiffness of the motor PD controller is three order of magnitudes larger than the joint stiffness. Therefore, the effect of the elastic torque is expected to be reasonably small to neglect this effect. Later on this will be confirmed with realistic simulation parameters. Furthermore, the result for the optimal control basically leads to switching the motor velocity sign when the elastic joint torque is zero, i.e. it does not significantly affect the motor velocity during the switching duration.
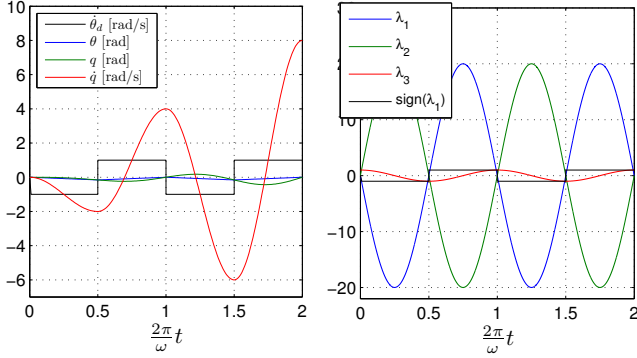
Fig. 3. Solution of the adjoint and system equations.

Together with its final conditions (row 6) the adjoint equation system (row 5) forms a final value problem.

For case A we obtain following solution for the relevant adjoint λ_1.

$$\lambda_1 = \omega \sin(\omega(t - t_f)) \qquad (9)$$

The switching law is therefore

$$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \dot{\theta}_{\max} \, \text{sgn}(\sin(\omega(t - t_f))). \qquad (10)$$

This rectangular function, which frequency is the resonance frequency of the joint has a phase shift that depends on t_f in order to maximize the link side velocity at this particular time instant. Figure 3 depicts an example for the solution of the adjoint and system equation as well as the input. This result leads to the conclusion that with half period $t = \omega/(4\pi)$ the link side velocity is doubled.

As for case A, the optimal control trajectory of case B is derived also from Pontriyagin's maximum principle. The solution is again linear in u and thus of bang-bang type. The switching times depend for case B on $\text{sign}(\lambda_2)$, which is found to be

$$\lambda_2(t) = \left(B^2 K_J \, e^{\frac{K_P \left(t - t_f\right)}{B}} - B^2 K_J \cos\left(\omega\left(t - t_f\right)\right) \right.$$
$$\left. - B \, K_P \sin\left(\omega\left(t - t_f\right)\right) \sqrt{K_J M} \right) \left(K_P{}^2 M + K_J B^2 \right)^{-1}. \qquad (11)$$

Compared to case A the switching condition consists of an additional trigonometric and exponential lag term. However, the principal structure remains the same.

For case C the solution is also similar to the previous ones, except for some additional trigonometric and exponential terms. Again, they do not alter the principal switching structure. The switching condition is

$$\lambda_1 + \frac{K_D}{B} \lambda_3 = -\frac{K_D K_J^2 B}{X1} \cos\left(\omega\left(t - t_f\right)\right)$$
$$+ \frac{\left(K_J B K_P - K_J K_D{}^2 - K_P{}^2 M\right) \sqrt{K_J M}}{X1} \sin\left(\omega\left(t - t_f\right)\right) \qquad (12)$$
$$+ \frac{X4}{X1 \, X2} e^{\frac{(t - t_f)(X2 + K_D)}{2B}} + \frac{X3}{X1 \, X2} e^{\frac{(t - t_f)(-X2 + K_D)}{2B}}$$

with

$$X1 = K_J K_D{}^2 M + K_J{}^2 B^2 - 2 K_J B K_P M + K_P{}^2 M^2$$
$$X2 = \sqrt{K_D{}^2 - 4 K_P B}$$
$$X3 = 1/2 \, K_J B \left(-2 K_J B K_P + 2 K_P{}^2 M + K_J K_D \sqrt{K_D{}^2 - 4 K_P B} + K_J K_D{}^2\right)$$
$$X4 = 1/2 \, K_J B \left(2 K_J B K_P - 2 K_P{}^2 M + K_J K_D \sqrt{K_D{}^2 - 4 K_P B} - K_J K_D{}^2\right). \qquad (13)$$

In order to complete the motor model, the feedback of the elastic joint torque shall be considered now (case D). Table 2 lists again all relevant equations and also the switching law. Unfortunately, we did not find an analytical

solution for this system. Therefore, numerical methods have to be applied. Since the adjoints are not coupled with the system's differential equation they can e.g. be solved with the Runge-Kutta method via numerical integration.
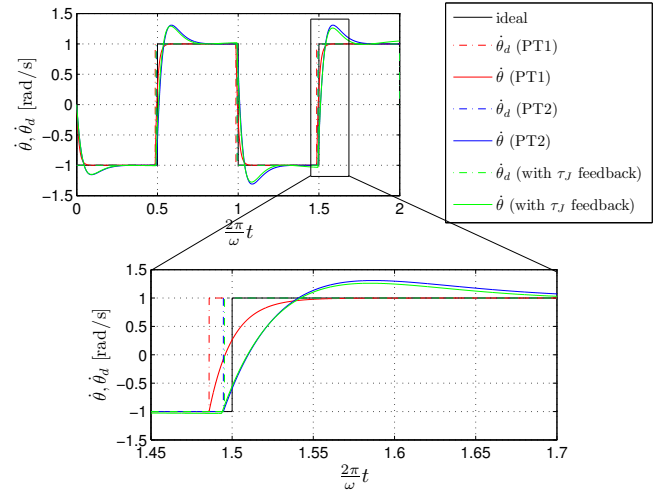

Fig. 4. Comparison of the different models.

A comparison of the different motor models is depicted in Fig. 4, showing the dynamic response of $\dot{\theta}$ for $\dot{\theta}_d$, being the step function. Two main observations can be made: The significant switching time between PT1 and PT2 and the negligible influence of the elastic joint torque τ_J on the motor response of the PT2 model.

The main conclusions up to now are

- It is possible to significantly exceed the motor maximum velocity with only some switching cycles.
- The solution leads to an excitation trajectory that is directly related to the eigenfrequency of the joint.
- Motor dynamics do not influence the principal switching structure.
- Every delay element leads to a phase shift of the switching times.
- Adding the influence of the elastic joint torque τ_J does not significantly affect the result, as the switching basically occurs during the fully relaxed moment of the joint.
- Insufficient motor dynamics lead to a saturation of the characteristic velocity increase curve (not described for brevity).

In the next section we discuss the influence of an important real-world constraint of VIA joints: the elastic deflection limit $\varphi_{\max}$.

4. CONSTRAINED DEFLECTION

$\varphi_{\max}$ can be expressed as an inequality constraint on the difference of motor and link side position. Its second derivative incorporates the control variable. Thus, the order of the constraint is $q = 2$ and one contact point exists.

$$S^{(0)} := (\theta - q) - \varphi_{\max} \leq 0 \qquad (14)$$
$$S^{(1)} := (\dot{\theta} - \dot{q}) \leq 0 \qquad (15)$$
$$S^{(2)} := (\ddot{\theta} - \ddot{q}) \leq 0 \qquad (16)$$

The formulation of the optimal control problem with constraints is based on the model of case D. The Hamiltonian

is extended by a term that incorporates new Lagrange multipliers $\boldsymbol{\mu}$. In total one obtains an 11th order canonical system of differential equations with side constraints. For contact points the conditions given in Bryson and Ho [1975] count. This leads to a jump in the adjoint variables for the contact time t_b. Because $\frac{\partial S^{(2)}}{\partial x_i} = 0$ and for choosing $\mu_1 = 0$ we may write

$$\lambda_2(t_b^+) = \lambda_2(t_b^-) + \mu_0 \frac{dS^{(0)}}{dx_2} \tag{17}$$

$$\lambda_4(t_b^+) = \lambda_4(t_b^-) + \mu_0 \frac{dS^{(0)}}{dx_4}. \tag{18}$$

The concrete jumping conditions are

$$\lambda_2(t_b^+) = \lambda_2(t_b^-) + \mu_0 \tag{19}$$
$$\lambda_4(t_b^+) = \lambda_2(t_b^-) - \mu_0.$$

The additional trivial differential equation is

$$\dot{\mu}_0 = 0. \tag{20}$$

The full system of equations can be solved with a numerical multiple-shooting method as e.g. described in Bulirsch and Stoer [1978], Carl-Cranz-Gesellschaft [1981].
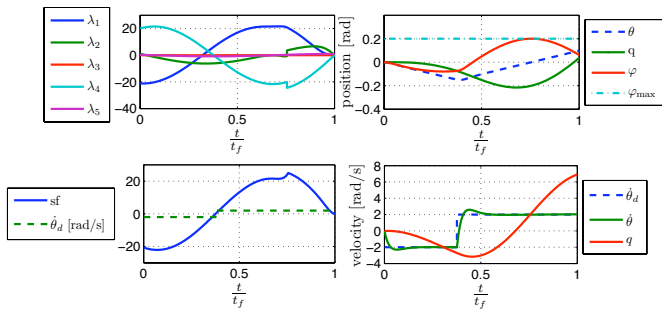

Fig. 5. Optimization with limited elastic deflection. sf denotes the switching function.

Figure 5 depicts such a numerical solution of the *multi-point boundary value problem* (MPBVP) obtained with the multiple-goal method implemented with the program BNDSCO, Oberle [2001]. Important to notice is that for the constrained deflection case the optimization aims at the maximal elastic deflection (upper right). The optimal switching time is rather defined by keeping the constraints than resonant excitation.

In the next section we discuss to what extent the stiffness adjustment during motion contributes to an increase in maximum link side velocity.

5. STIFFNESS ADJUSTMENT

First, we take into consideration the influence of stiffness adjustment without a deflection constraint and then analyze the effect such limits have.

5.1 Unconstrained deflection

In order to elaborate the effect of stiffness adjustment, we choose the underlying model for this analysis to be the one of case A. The joint stiffness is now considered as an additional control input. Overall, the system equations are

$$\theta = \int \dot{\theta}_d \, dt \quad \text{with } \dot{\theta}_{\min} \leq \dot{\theta} \leq \dot{\theta}_{\max} \tag{21}$$

$$M\ddot{q} = K_J(t)(\theta - q) \quad \text{with } K_{J,\min} \leq K_J(t) \leq K_{J,\max}, \tag{22}$$

with $\mathbf{x} = [\theta \quad q \quad \dot{q}]^T$ being the state vector and $\mathbf{u} = [\dot{\theta}_d \quad K_J(t)]^T$ the control input vector. The canonical system of differential equations is

$$\dot{x}_1 = u_1 \tag{23}$$
$$\dot{x}_2 = x_3 \tag{24}$$
$$\dot{x}_3 = \frac{u_2}{M}(x_1 - x_2) \tag{25}$$

$$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_3\omega^2 \tag{26}$$
$$\dot{\lambda}_2 = \lambda_3\omega^2 \tag{27}$$
$$\dot{\lambda}_3 = -\lambda_2. \tag{28}$$

The corresponding Hamiltonian can be derived as

$$H(\mathbf{x}(t), \boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), \mathbf{u}(t), t) = \lambda_1 u_1 + \lambda_2 x_3 + \lambda_3 \frac{u_2}{M}(x_1 - x_2). \tag{29}$$

The Hamiltonian is linear in u_1 and u_2, leading directly to following switching laws.

$$\dot{\theta}_d^* = \begin{cases} \dot{\theta}_{\max}, & \lambda_1 > 0 \\ \dot{\theta}_{\min}, & \lambda_1 < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_1 = 0 \end{cases} \tag{30}$$

$$K_{J,d}^* = \begin{cases} K_{J,\max}, & \lambda_3 \frac{x_1-x_2}{M} > 0 \\ K_{J,\min}, & \lambda_3 \frac{x_1-x_2}{M} < 0 \\ \text{singular}, & \lambda_3 \frac{x_1-x_2}{M} = 0 \end{cases} \tag{31}$$

Due to the bang-bang structure of the desired stiffness the solution of the adjoints is similar to (9). However, this time a variable eigenfrequency characterizes the result [3].

$$\lambda_1 = \sqrt{\frac{u_2}{M}} \sin\left(\sqrt{\frac{u_2}{M}}(t - t_f)\right) \tag{32}$$

$$\lambda_3 = \cos\left(\sqrt{\frac{u_2}{M}}(t - t_f)\right) \tag{33}$$

For the present case two adjoints influence the switching condition. λ_1 determines the excitation of the system with $\dot{\theta}_d$ in resonance, depending on the current eigenfrequency. The stiffness switching function is characterized by two terms. First, the sign of the elastic deflection $\text{sign}(x_1 - x_2)$ and secondly, the switching function λ_3.

5.2 Constrained deflection

Based on Sec. 4 it is clear that the stiffness adjustment between maximal elastic deflection (maximum potential energy stored) and the time instant of maximal velocity (moment of launch) is critical. Therefore, we investigate the maximization of the Hamiltonian (29) during this particular time interval. The term containing the stiffness u_2 and the elastic deflection $(x_1 - x_2) = (\theta - q)$ is to be maximized.

$$\max\left\{\lambda_3 \frac{u_2}{M}(x_1 - x_2)\right\}. \tag{34}$$

$(x_1 - x_2)$ is always larger than zero between the moment of its maximal value and launch. The maximal value will be achieved the earliest at $t_f - \frac{1}{2\pi\omega}$. Due to the transversality condition $\partial h(\mathbf{x}(t_f))/\partial x_3 = \partial \dot{q}(t_f)/\partial \dot{q} = 1$

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[3] Pease note that the eigenfrequency is not continuously varying, but switching between its minimum and maximum value.

the last adjoint λ_3 reaches its maximal value $\lambda_3 = 1$ at t_f (see (33)). Furthermore, it changes its sign also at a quarter of the periodicity before the launch time. The switching function λ_3 is consequently positive in the considered time interval. This leads, according to the maximum principle, to maximizing the stiffness (see (31)) towards the moment of launch.

$$K_J^* = K_{J,\max} \qquad\qquad t_b \leq t \leq t_f \qquad (35)$$

Up to now, we assumed that the stiffness trajectory before the boundary point does not influence the end velocity. Therefore, it seems reasonable to set the stiffness to its maximum value during the throwing trajectory without additionally adjusting the stiffness. However, from a practical point of view it can be necessary to start the motion at low stiffness adjustment and enlarge it towards the launch time. This can have three main reasons:

- The motor dynamics is not sufficient to excite the joint at maximum stiffness at the corresponding eigenfrequency.
- The motor power is not sufficient to deflect the joint with an adequately low number of switching cycles.
- Limits on the elastic deflection can lead to higher energy storage for lower stiffness ranges due to higher possible deflection than for larger stiffness presets.
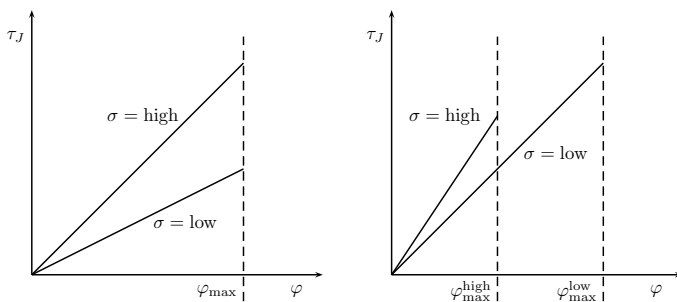

Fig. 6. Deflection limits $\varphi_{\max}$ for different stiffness presets σ. The left figure shows a design, where $\varphi_{\max}$ is constant for every σ and the right one depicts a functional relationship between $\varphi_{\max}$ and σ.

The last aspect can be explained with Fig. 6 and is caused by the particular implemented working principle of the VIA mechanism[4]. The left figure shows two different linear stiffness curves for which the maximum deflection is constant for all presets. On the right figure characteristics are depicted, where a functional relationship between maximum deflection and stiffness preset exists.

First, let us discuss the former. According to the maximum principle the Hamiltonian is maximized through the entire motion process and therefore the joint stiffness as well. Consequently, the potential energy stored in the joint elasticity is maximized for every deflection. This induces that it is not optimal to change the stiffness, on the contrary, it reduces the achievable link velocity.

For the latter characteristics the maximum elastic energy that can be stored depends on the deflection. For large deflection a soft preset and for small deflection a stiff one are to be preferred. Maximization of joint torque is therefore directly coupled with adjusting stiffness along the admissible deflection.

[4] Please note that we describe the fact with varying linear joint stiffness, i.e. there exists a directly proportional relation between σ and K_J. However, the same statements hold also for a possibly nonlinear relation as for the QA-Joint that is discussed in the next section.

Whether the stiffness adjustment is energy efficient depends on the particular design. If internal contraction is necessary to adjust a certain stiffness, this of course costs a significant amount of energy before one can actually use it. Apart from that, the stiffness adjustments during the dynamic deflection phase does always cost the energetic difference between the respective stiffness (τ_J, φ) curves plus some parasitic effects. Basically, the energetic requirement given by the desired task one intends to solve defines therefore the requirements to the stiffness adjustment mechanism by means of achievable power.

Next, we discuss the analysis for a concrete joint design and present various experimental results.

6. ANALYSIS FOR THE QA-JOINT

In this section we apply the elaborated insights to a prototypical VIA design, the DLR QA-Joint[5].

6.1 Without stiffness adjustment

For the QA-Joint, Eiberger et al. [2010], the elastic joint torque τ_J is defined as

$$\tau_J = 40(e^{15(\varphi-\sigma)} - e^{15(-\varphi-\sigma)}), \qquad (36)$$

so the mapping from stiffness actuator to stiffness $\sigma \rightarrow K_J = \partial\tau_J/\partial q$ is a nonlinear function. With the state vector $\mathbf{x}^T = [\theta_d \ \theta \ \dot{\theta} \ q \ \dot{q}]$, $u = \dot{\theta}_d$ and initial conditions $\mathbf{x}^T(0) = [0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0]$ we obtain the following system of differential equations when assuming elastic torque feedback and PT2 motor behavior.

$$\dot{x}_1 = u \quad \dot{x}_2 = x_3 \quad \dot{x}_3 = \frac{1}{B}(\tilde{\tau}_m - \tau_J) \quad \dot{x}_4 = x_5 \quad \dot{x}_5 = \frac{\tau_J}{M} (37)$$

$\tilde{\tau}_m$ denotes the bounded motor torque

$$\tilde{\tau}_m = \begin{cases} \tau_{m,\max} & \tau_{m,d} \geq \tau_m^{\max} \\ \tau_{m,d} & \tau_m^{\min} < \tau_{m,d} < \tau_m^{\max} \\ \tau_{m,\min} & \tau_{m,d} \leq \tau_{m,d}^{\min}, \end{cases}$$

$$(38)$$

with $\tau_{m,d} = K_D(u - x_3) + K_P(x_1 - x_2)$ being the desired motor torque from the PD controller. The Hamiltonian is

$$H(.) = \lambda_1 u + \lambda_2 x_3 + \lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}(\tilde{\tau}_m - \tau_J(\sigma)) + \lambda_4 x_5 + \lambda_5 \frac{1}{M}\tau_J(\sigma).$$

$$(39)$$

The optimal control problem to be solved consists of a system of differential equation of 11th order (adjoint and system equations), including the additional trivial differential equation if taking into account the elastic deflection limit with one boundary point, see Sec. 4. The nonlinearity causes a coupling of the adjoint and state equations, leading to a MPBVP with separated initial and end conditions for the canonical system of differential equations[6]. The limits of motor torque eventually lead to a necessary formulation of boundary control. Solving this problem with multi-goal methods turned out to be very unstable. This is because on the one side for n nodes $5n$ starting conditions need to be estimated and their deviation from the solution is highly influencing the convergence of the method. Furthermore, a physical interpretation of the adjoint variables is also not given. Thus, the estimation of their start values, which would lead to a solution is not straight forward.

[5] For details on the joint design, please refer to Eiberger et al. [2010].
[6] The adjoint system is given in Appendix A.

A possibility to solve this optimization is a parameter estimation method by utilizing the information that the optimal control trajectory shows bang-bang behavior (which comes from the linear occurrence of the input into the state equation). This is also independent from the limit in motor torque $\tilde{\tau}_m$ (see (38)), as the principal structure of the Hamiltonian remains the same regardless of the saturation [7]:

$$\widetilde{H}(\boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), u(t)) = \left(\lambda_1 + \lambda_3 \frac{K_p}{B}\right) u, \quad \tau_{m,\min} < \tau_{m,d} < \tau_{m,\max} \quad (40)$$

$$\widetilde{H}(\boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), u(t)) = \lambda_1 u, \quad (\tau_{m,d} < \tau_{m,\min}) \vee (\tau_{m,d} > \tau_{m,\max}) \quad (41)$$

The parameter to be estimated is the switching time. The optimization is carried out by multiple solving of the system equations with the jumping times in the control variable being timely varied via appropriate optimization. The used algorithm is the Nelder-Mead simplex downhill method with the following optimization criterion.

$$J = -\dot{q} + J_p \quad (42)$$

$$J_p = \begin{cases} 0 & \varphi_{\min} \leq \varphi \leq \varphi_{\max} \\ \exp\left(|\varphi| - \varphi_{\max}\right) & |\varphi| > \varphi_{\max} \end{cases} \quad (43)$$

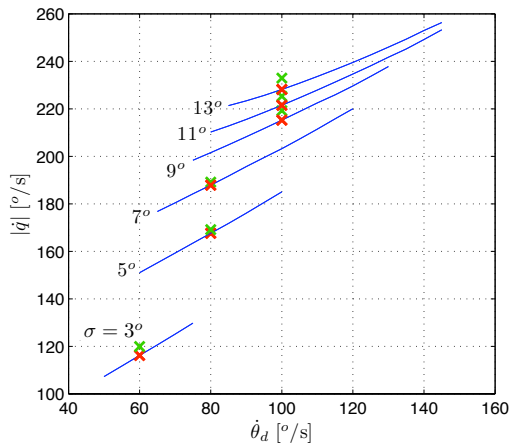Complying with the constraints is ensured with the penalty term J_p.

Fig. 7. Final link velocity as a function of motor velocity.

Under the premise of achieving maximal deflection with one switching cycle (throwing with striking out once), a limited velocity range for the position motor complies. On the one hand, a minimum velocity for achieving the maximal deflection is needed and on the other side, there exists a maximum velocity at which the constraint can still be ensured. The simulation results are depicted in Fig. 7 and Fig. 8. The red marked points on the theoretical graphs were experimentally verified (green crosses).

Figure 7 shows the absolute achievable final velocity, as a function of commanded motor velocity characterized by the almost linear relationship. This induces a continuous velocity increase with stored potential energy. Furthermore, it becomes clear that too low elasticity leads to a degradation of achievable link velocity. The relative velocity increase with respect to the motor velocity at final time is depicted in Fig. 8. If this relation is considered as the
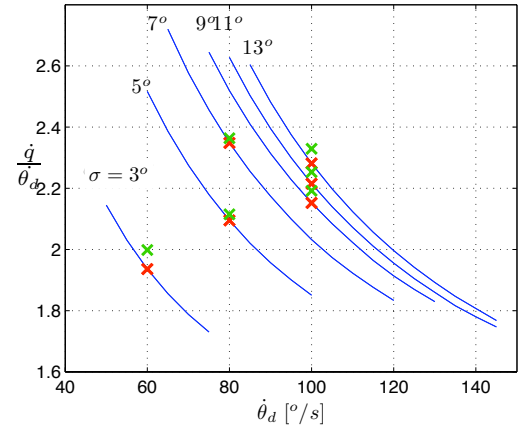

Fig. 8. Relative final link side velocity as a function of motor velocity.

speed gain [8] of the elastic mechanism, it can be stated that it degrades with increasing motor velocity and increasing stiffness. As already explained, it is necessary to drive with higher motor velocities to achieve the maximum deflection for low stiffness. For the QA-Joint the largest speed gain can be obtained at $\theta_d = 65$ ^{o}/s and moderate stiffness. This is equivalent to an efficiency of 2.7.
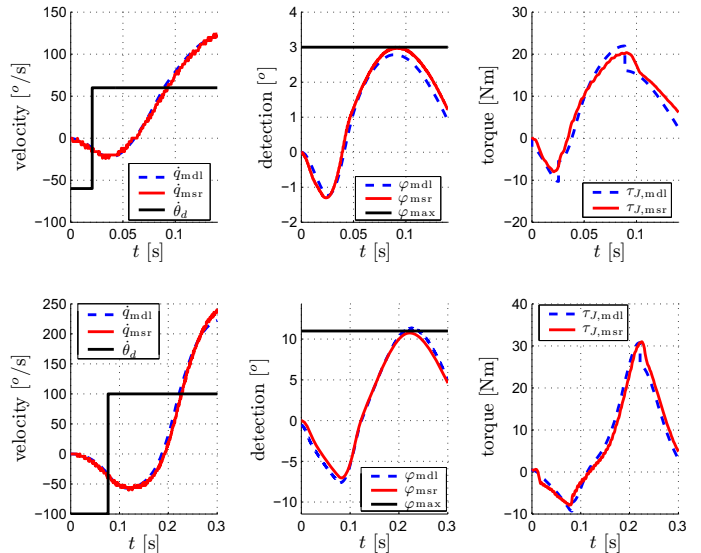

Fig. 9. Comparison of simulation and measurements for different stiffness presets. The upper row shows the motion for $\dot{\theta}_d = 60$ ^{o}/s and $\sigma = 3$ ^{o}. The lower row depicts the results for $\dot{\theta}_d = 100$ ^{o}/s, $\sigma = 11$ ^{o}. The subscript mdl indicates the simulation and msr depicts the experimental results.

In Figure 9 the time courses of measurements and simulations for high and low stiffness presets are shown. The relevant variables are the link side velocity, deflection, and the elastic joint torque.

- **link velocity (left):**
  The trajectory of the link velocity shows very good consistency with the simulation. At final time the velocity is approximately twice the motor velocity. The deviation in joint torque are almost not reflected in the velocity profile.

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[7] Please note that only the relevant term of the Hamiltonian is shown, which linearly depends on u.

[8] Please note that we consider the speed gain to be a relevant quantity, as it relates the achievable link side velocity to the maximum desired motor velocity.

- **deflection (middle):**
  In contrast to the simulation a slight exceedance of the deflection constraints can be observed in the lower row. This is mainly due to the variance in the identified stiffness and friction parameters, calibration errors, and simplified assumptions for the friction model.
- **joint torque (right):**
  The principal time course of the joint torque confirms the joint model with respect to the identification of stiffness and friction. The discontinuities in the simulation are caused by the Coulomb friction model during direction changes.

Next, we discuss the effect of stiffness adjustment for the QA-Joint.

6.2 Stiffness adjustment

For the stiffness adjustment during the motion there are also some conclusions to be drawn. For the linear joint stiffness it was shown that the relation between stiffness and deflection is critical, see Sec. 5.1. For the QA-Joint this constraint is formally defined as

$$\sigma \geq \varphi \qquad\qquad \sigma \in [3^o \; 15^o]. \qquad (44)$$

For maximizing the Hamiltonian (39), following term is considered, which explicitly depends on the stiffness adjustment σ.

$$\widetilde{H}(\boldsymbol{\lambda}(t), \mathbf{x}(t), \sigma(t)) = \underbrace{\left(\lambda_5 \frac{1}{M} - \lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}\right)}_{\lambda^*} \tau_J(\sigma) \qquad (45)$$

As assumed in Sec. 5.1 only a stiffening during the relaxation phase is essential. Thus, the sign of $\dot{\varphi}$ does not change. In Appendix A it is shown that $\lambda^* \geq 0$ holds during the entire adjustment phase. Therefore, τ_J has to be maximized [9].

$$\tau_J = \frac{1}{e^{15\sigma}} \left[(a_S - a_R)e^{15(x_2 - x_4)} - (b_S + b_R)e^{15(-x_2+x_4)} \right] \quad (46)$$

The maximization of the elastic torque in turn necessitates the maximization of stiffness, respectively a minimization of σ at every time instant. Taking (44) into account the optimal stiffness trajectory is

$$\sigma^* = \begin{cases} 3; & \varphi \leq 3 \\ \varphi; & 3 < \varphi < 15. \end{cases} \qquad t_b \leq t \leq t_f \quad (47)$$

This means that the acceleration torque has to be sustained during relaxation as long as possible. From an energy point of view the stiffness adjuster injects additional energy such that the joint maximally stores potential energy for a certain deflection. The potential energy that can be converted into kinetic energy is therefore maximized at the same time.

The according experimental verification is depicted in Fig. 10 and Fig. 11. For a moderate stiffness preset $\sigma = 9$ ^{o} the achieved link velocity is 266 ^{o}/sec., which is approximately 20 % higher than without adjustment. From Figure 11 (left) it can be observed that adjusting the stiffness according to (47) is not fully achieved due to too little dynamics of the stiffness motor [10]. Nonetheless,

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[9] Please note that for this case τ_J denotes the ideal elastic joint torque plus a friction model, Eiberger et al. [2010].

[10] Please note that the stiffness adjuster is assumed to show ideal behavior for the simulation.
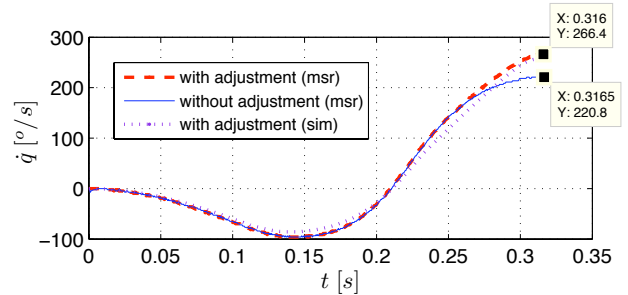

Fig. 10. Link side velocity with stiffness adjustment. The subscript *sim* indicates the simulation and *msr* depicts the experimental results.
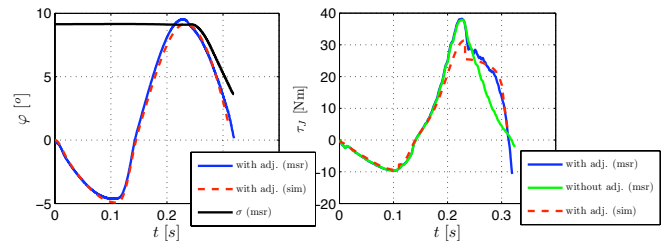

Fig. 11. Deflection (left) and joint torque (right) with stiffness adjustment. The subscript *sim* indicates the simulation and *msr* depicts the experimental results.

a significant velocity increase is observed here as well. Compared to the constant elasticity case the joint torque shows an increase from the moment of adjustment on, confirming the theoretical requirement to maximize the sustaining torque during relaxation phase.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we developed a theoretically sound concept to achieve an optimal speed gain for Variable Impedance Actuators based on optimal control theory. It was shown that intrinsic elasticity can be used to significantly exceed the maximum motor velocity. Furthermore, depending on the performance of the stiffness adjustment mechanism, it is possible to inject energy by altering stiffness in a timely optimal sense such that the link can even drive faster than wit constant elasticity only. This of course requires a second actuator for providing the required power. Maximum elastic deflection, which is the most important real-world constraint, leads basically to a solution that aims at fully loading the elastic energy storage without violating the constraint, i.e. reach the maximally feasible energetic state for the system prior to releasing the stored energy into the link. We also verified the schemes on the DLR QA-Joint, a novel VSA prototype, which is one of the basis mechanisms for the anthropomorphic DLR hand arm system. Our future work will deal with the extension to the N-DoF case.

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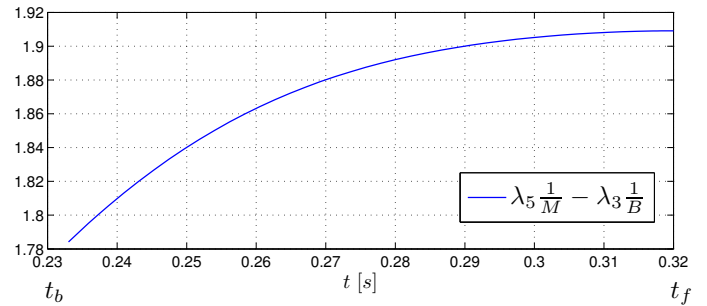
Fig. A.1. Solution of the switching function with stiffness adjustment.

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Appendix A. SOLVING THE ADJOINT EQUATIONS

In order to confirm the assumption $\lambda^* \geq 0$ for the experiment carried out in Sec. 6.2, the adjoint equations have to be solved for the time interval of stiffness adjustment. Since they do not show discontinuities they can be solved numerically as a final value problem by utilizing the already optimized solution of the state equations.

The solution of the adjoint equation systems in the time interval $[t_b \ t_f]$ gives the confirmation that the stiffness adjustment presented in Sec. 4 is indeed satisfying optimal control theory. For this, the switching function λ^* has to have positive sign in this interval. The system of differential equation for the adjoints is

$$\dot{\lambda}_1 = -\lambda_3 \frac{1}{B} K_P \tag{A.1}$$

$$\dot{\lambda}_2 = \lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}((b_S - b_R) \exp(15(\varphi - \sigma)) \tag{A.2}$$
$$-(a_s - a_R)\exp(15(\varphi - \sigma)) + K_P)$$

$$\dot{\lambda}_3 = -\lambda_2 + \lambda3 \frac{K_P}{B} \tag{A.3}$$

$$\dot{\lambda}_4 = \left(\lambda_5 \frac{1}{M} + \lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}\right)((b_S - b_R) \exp(15(\varphi - \sigma)) \tag{A.4}$$
$$+(a_S - a_R)\exp(15(\varphi - \sigma)))$$

$$\dot{\lambda}_5 = -\lambda_4, \tag{A.5}$$

where $\varphi = x_2 - x_4$. With final values $\boldsymbol{\lambda}^T(t_f) = [0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \ 1]$ the problem can be formulated as final value problem and e.g. be solved with the Runge-Kutta method. Figure A.1 depicts the solution of the switching function $\lambda^* = \lambda_5 \frac{1}{M} - \lambda_3 \frac{1}{B}$, showing the positive sign over the relevant time interval.