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To cite this version:

Juliette Leblond, Jean-Paul Marmorat, Christos Papageorgakis. Inverse skull conductivity estimation problems from EEG data. 1st International Conference on Mathematical Neuroscience (ICMNS), Jun 2015, Juan-les-Pins, France. <http://icmns2015.inria.fr/>. <hal-01243059>

HAL Id: hal-01243059
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01243059
Submitted on 23 Dec 2015

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Inverse skull conductivity estimation problems from EEG data

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1st ICNMS
June 8-10, 2015

Introduction

A fundamental problem in theoretical neurosciences is the inverse problem of source localization, which aims at locating the sources of the electric activity of the functioning human brain using measurements usually acquired by non-invasive imaging techniques, such as the electroencephalography (EEG). EEG measures the effect of the electric activity of active brain regions through values of the electric potential furnished by a set of electrodes placed at the surface of the scalp [1] and serves for clinical (location of epilepsy foci) and functional brain investigation. The inverse source localization problem in EEG is influenced by the electric conductivities of the several head tissues and mostly by the conductivity of the skull. The human skull is a bony tissue consisting of compact and spongy bone compartments, whose shape and size vary over the age and the individual’s anatomy making difficult to accurately model the skull conductivity.

1. Physical formulation

Under the quasi-static approximation for the EEG case, Maxwell’s equations imply:

\[ \nabla \times \mathbf{E} = 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \nabla \cdot \mathbf{J} = 0 \]

for the electric fields \( \mathbf{E} \) and the current density \( \mathbf{J} \). The first, deduces that \( \mathbf{E} = -\nabla \phi \), while dividing the current density \( \mathbf{J} \) into the ohmic current \( \mathbf{J}_o \) and the source current (also known as primary current) \( \mathbf{J}_s \) leads to our general model for the electric potential \( \phi \) in terms of conductivity Poisson equation with source term in divergence form:

\[ \nabla \cdot (\sigma \nabla \phi) = -\sum_{r} q_r \delta(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}_0) \quad \text{in } \mathbb{R}^3 \]

where \( q_r \) is the real valued (isotropic assumption) conductivity of the medium at location \( \mathbf{r} \).

Modeling the primary current \( \mathbf{J}_o \) as the result of the superposition of \( Q \) pointwise dipolar sources, leads to:

\[ \nabla \cdot (\sigma \nabla \phi) = -\sum_{i=1}^{Q} \sum_{m,n} r_{mn} \frac{\mathbf{p}_m}{r_{mn}^3} \delta(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}_m) \quad \text{in } \mathbb{R}^3 \]

where \( \mathbf{p}_m \) is the moment of the source and \( \mathbf{r}_m \) is the Dirac distribution with mass at \( \mathbf{r}_m \).

\[ \nabla \sim \text{grad} \quad \nabla \cdot \text{div} \quad \nabla \sim \text{curl} \]

3. Data, boundary conditions and expansions

We solve the conductivity estimation problem from the available EEG partial boundary data:

\[ U_0 = \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma}, \quad \text{pointwise values on } S_t \text{ at electrode locations} \]

\[ \partial_{n} U_0 = 0, \quad \text{no current flux outside the head} \]

while the source term is assumed to be already estimated, with the solution \( U_0 \) in \( \Omega_0 \), being expressed as the convolution of the source term \( \phi'(\mathbf{r}) \) with the fundamental solution (Green formula):

\[ U_0 = \sum_{r,m \in Q} \int_{S_t} g_{m} \delta(r - r_m) \, dS \]

The source activity \( U_0 \) and the EEG data \( \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma} \) are expanded on spherical harmonics basis:

\[ \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma}(\mathbf{r}) = \sum_{k,m} \tilde{g}_{km}(\mathbf{r}) Y_{km}(\theta, \phi), \quad \mathbf{r} \in \Omega_0, C_{\Omega_0} \]

4. Uniqueness properties and reconstruction algorithm

Linear algebra computations allow us to establish uniqueness properties and a reconstruction algorithm for the skull conductivity \( \sigma_2 \). The data transmission \( \left( U_0, \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma} \right) \) from a spherical interface \( S_t \) to a neighbouring spherical interface \( S_T \) can be expressed by the following general matrix equation.

\[ T_{\sigma_2}[\sigma] = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma} \mid S_T \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & \sigma_2 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \frac{\nabla \phi}{\sigma} \mid S_t \end{pmatrix} \]

From this general form, it is possible to derive a polynomial equation for \( \sigma_2 \) which is connected to the inverse transmission matrix. The solution of this polynomial equation gives the conductivity \( \sigma_2 \). The unique admissible solution \( \sigma_2 \) is the one which satisfies the constraint 0 < \( \sigma_2 < \min(\sigma_1, \sigma_3) \) and make \( \beta_2 \) achieve its minimal value \( |F(\beta)| = 0 \), up to a tolerance value tol.

As the reconstruction of the conductivity \( \sigma_2 \) does not depend on the spherical harmonics index \( m \), in order to increase the robustness of our reconstruction algorithm, the following normalization is applied on the different spherical harmonics indices \( m \).

\[ \beta_2 = \frac{\sum_{m=1}^{M} \beta_m^2}{\sum_{m=1}^{M} \beta_m^2} \]

5. Computational algorithm and improvements

We performed numerical analysis of the inverse conductivity estimation problem, using measurements and sources activities expanded on spherical harmonics basis \( g_{km}, h_{km} \) simulated by the FieldTripSDK [4] software, while our simulations were performed in MATLAB.

The EEG data are subject to ambient noise and measurements errors, while the estimate of the sources is not perfect. In our simulation, the inverse conductivity estimation problem is sensitive to such perturbations, forcing us to decrease the tolerance of our reconstruction algorithm to \( tol = 5 \times 10^{-3} \). As a result a significant amount of spherical harmonic coefficients is rejected, but the conductivity is still quite well estimated with a small number of them.

Numerical conductivity estimation results are shown in Fig. 1, 2, 3, where the mean value \( \bar{\sigma}_{est} \) of the estimated \( \sigma_{est} \) is the one to be compared with the actual conductivity value \( \sigma_{act} \).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur and the BESA company.

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