



LABORATORY INVESTIGATIONS OF FLUID MUSCLES

¹József SÁROSI, ¹János GYEVIKI, ¹Gábor SZABÓ, ²Péter SZENDRŐ

¹Department of Technical and Process Engineering, Faculty of Engineering,
University of Szeged, HUNGARY

²Institute of Mechanics and Machinery, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering,
Szent István University, HUNGARY

ABSTRACT:

The characteristics of pneumatic artificial muscles (PAMs) make them very interesting for the development of robotic and prosthesis applications. The McKibben muscle is the most popular and is made commercially available by different companies.

The aim of this research is to acquire as much information about the pneumatic artificial muscles as we can with our test-bed that was developed by us and to be able to adopt these muscles as a part of prosthesis.

This paper presents the set-up constructed, and then describes some mechanical testing results for the pneumatic artificial muscles.

KEYWORDS:

Pneumatic artificial muscles, test-bed, LabVIEW, characteristics

1. INTRODUCTION

PAMs have different names in literature: pneumatic muscle actuator, fluid actuator, fluid-driven actuator, axially actuator, tension actuator, etc. ([1], [2], [3] and [4]).

The pneumatic artificial muscle consists of rubber tubes and fibers. When the rubber tube is inflated with compressed air, the cross-weave sheath experiences lateral expansion, resulting in axial contractive force and the change of the end point position of pneumatic muscle.

The working principle of the pneumatic artificial muscles is well described in literature ([1], [2], [5], [6] and [7]).

Pneumatic muscles have many advantages such as high strength, good power-weight ratio, low price, little maintenance needed, great compliance, compactness, inherent safety and usage in rough environments ([6], [8]). The most significant problem of PAMs is nonlinearity ([9] and [10]).

The PAM that was selected as the actuator for our study is the Fluidic Muscle (DMSP-20-200N-RM-RM) manufactured by FESTO. According to its specification, maximum contraction over the nominal length is 25-27 %.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A good background of this research can be found in [11], [12] and [13].

The experimental set-up (Fig. 1) consists of a slider mechanism. One side of the muscle is fixed to a load cell, while the other side is attached to the movable frame. The load cell (7923 type from MOM) is a 4 bridge element of strain gauges. It is mounted inline to the PAM on the fixed surface. The load cell measures the force exerted by the PAM. The tests are performed by changing the displacement of this slider. The linear displacement of the actuator is measured using a LINIMIK MSA 320 type linear incremental encoder. During each test, frame position, muscle force and applied gauge pressure are recorded.

In the test-bed two fluidic muscles can be mounted. Instead of second PAM a bias spring or an external load can be attached with a flexible steel cable, producing the necessary counter force to pull the actuator back when it is not activated.

The air pressure applied to the actuators can be regulated with two adjustable regulator type Festo VPPM-6L-L-1-G1/8-oL6H-V1N-S1C1. The proportional pressure regulators (PPRs) are controlled by voltage inputs. The main purpose of the PPR is to regulate the pressure entering the PAM. To measure the air pressure, two Motorola MPX5999D pressure sensors were plumbed into the

pneumatic circuit. A National Instruments Multi-I/O card (NI 6251) reads the signal of force, pressure sensors and incremental encoder into the PC.

National Instruments LabVIEW is a typical example for high level software, capable of connecting various kinds of DAQ boards with a PC. We used this program to monitor and collect the data imported through the DAQ card. It will also dispatch the control profiles for the PPRs. Fig. 2 shows the environment in LabVIEW.

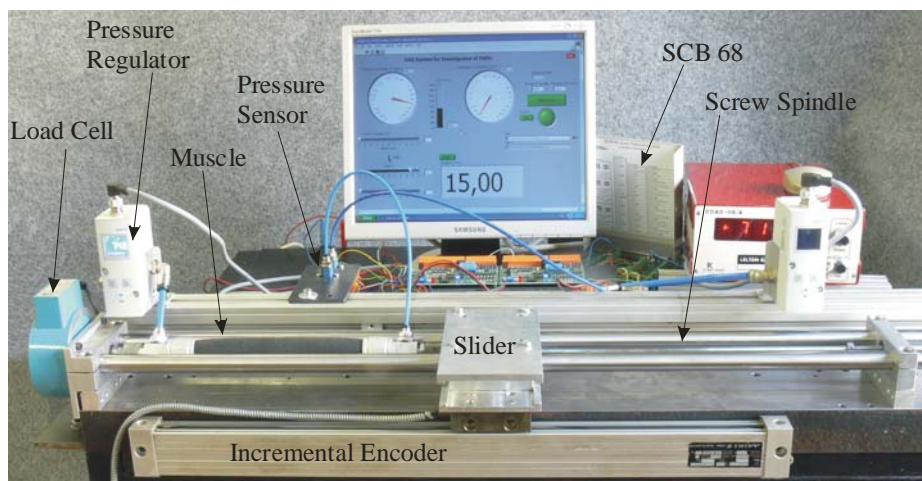


Figure 1. Experimental set-up for analysis of the pneumatic artificial muscle (fixed slider position)

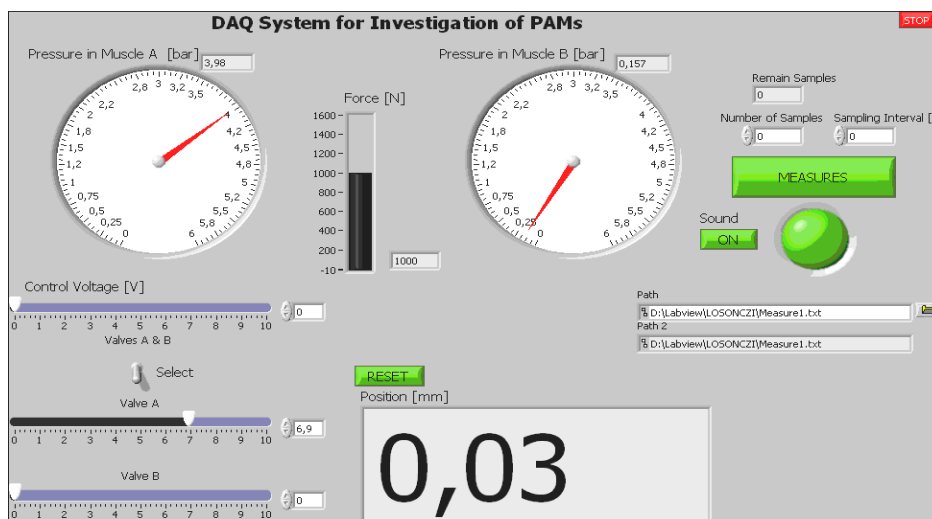


Figure 2. Front panel of the LabVIEW program

With the specially constructed testing machine, we are able to measure the static and dynamic characteristics of several versions of these pneumatic actuators.

3. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

The first experiment was done on the pressure of 5,5 bar. Fig. 3 shows the relation between tensile force [N] and position [mm] of this 20 mm diameter and 200 mm length artificial muscle.

Length of artificial muscle in constant pressure depends on force. This force decreases with increasing position of the muscle and the muscle inflates. There is a point (maximum position (50 mm)) where the volume reaches its maximum value, the length its minimal value (150 mm) and the force drops to zero. The characteristic is nonlinear.

We repeated the previous experiment under different constant pressures (0-5,5 bar). Fig. 4 shows the experimental results. Tensile force of artificial muscle is under different constant pressures a function of muscle length and of air pressure. The force always drops from its highest value at full muscle length to zero at full inflation and position.

Next, we examined the characteristics of PAMs in antagonistic set-up.

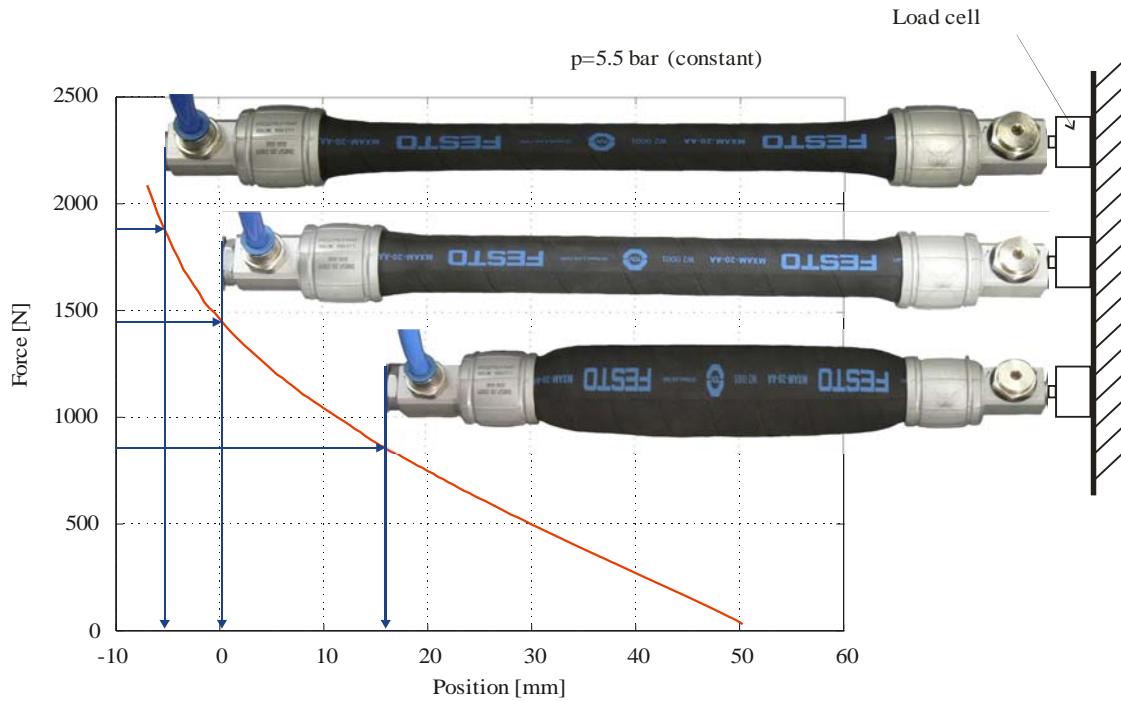


Figure 3. PAM isobaric force-position characteristic

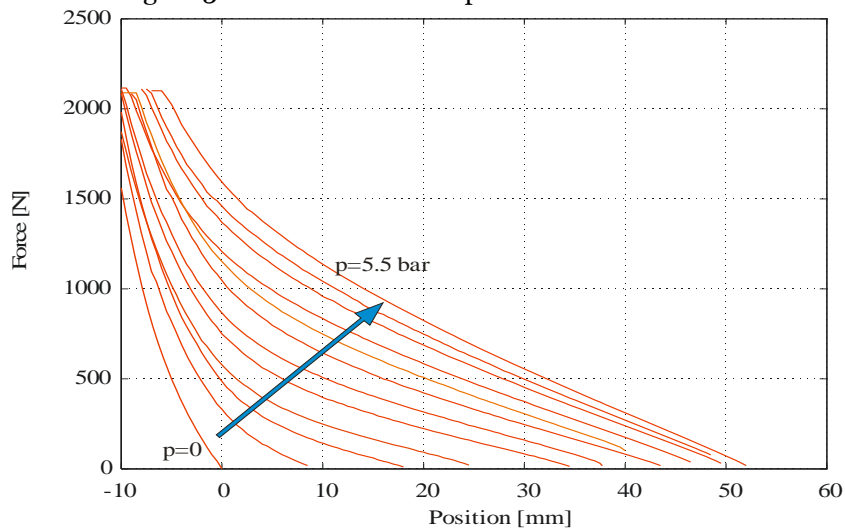


Figure 4. PAM isobaric force-position characteristics

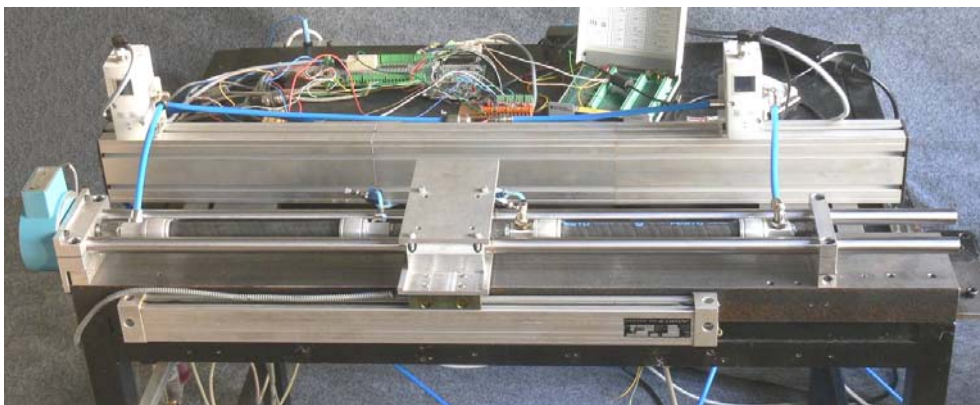


Figure 5. Experimental Set-Up For Analysis Of The Pneumatic Artificial Muscles (Antagonistic Configuration)

The antagonistic configuration of the actuators causes the active muscle to have to pull against the stiffness of the passive muscle. So, a pair of pneumatic artificial muscle actuators put into

antagonism configuration can imitate a biceps-triceps system and emphasize the analogy between this artificial muscle and human skeletal muscle.

In the antagonistic set-up, in the test-bed two muscles were mounted (Fig. 5). The characteristics of pneumatic artificial muscles under different constant pressures with antagonistic configuration of PAMs are shown in Fig. 6, where x_{max} means the maximum range of motion ($\pm 6-10$ mm). In an antagonistic set-up without external load, position is determined by the ratio of pressures in both muscles.

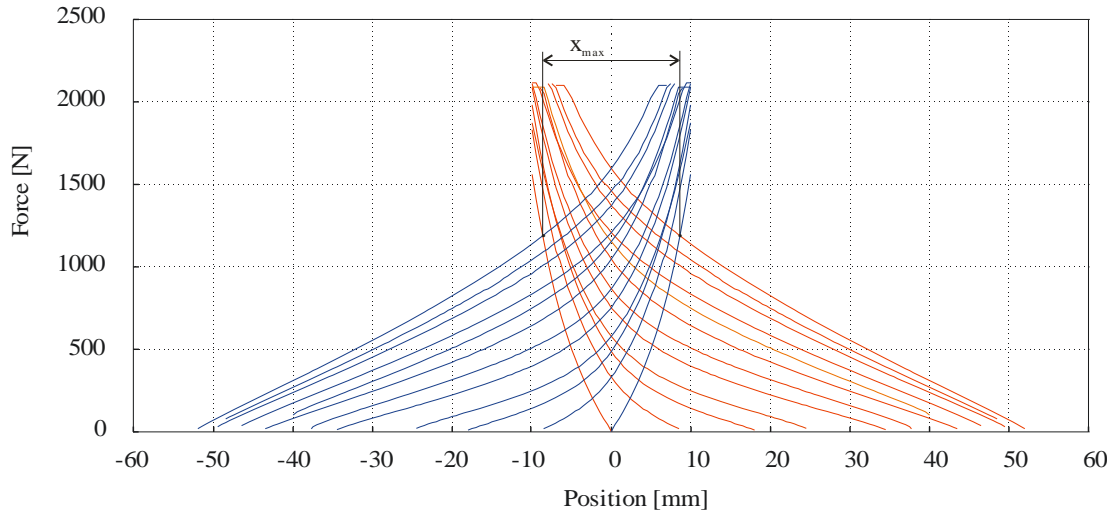


Figure 6. PAM's isobaric force-position characteristics in antagonistic configuration

Also, we mounted the PAMs into shorter places than their initial lengths (Fig. 7). Fig. 8 shows how to extend the operating range of pneumatic artificial muscles in antagonistic set-up.



Figure 7. Mounting pam's into shorter places than their initial lengths

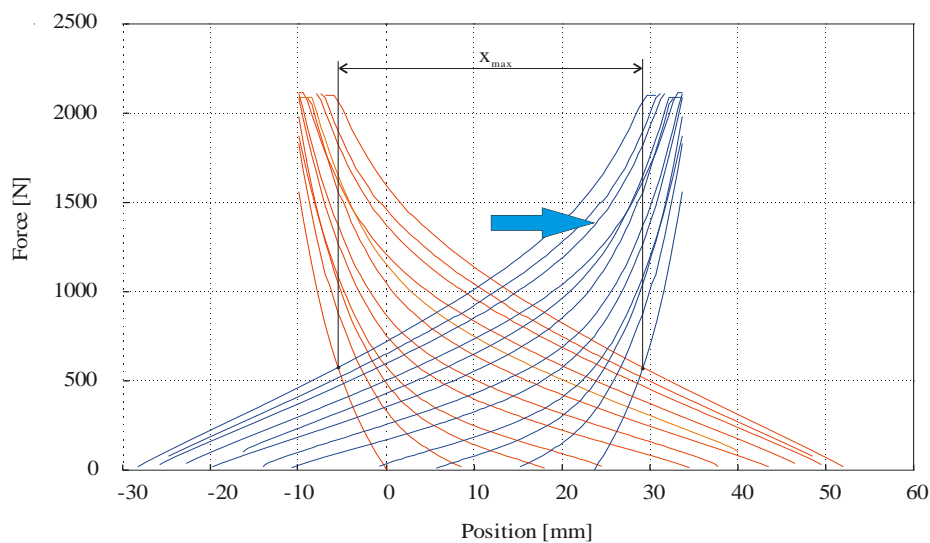


Figure 8. Extended operation range of PAM's

Many researchers have investigated the precise position control of pneumatic muscles during the past several years. Most of them dealt with the control of single or antagonistic pneumatic muscles. The positioning of PAMs requires accurate determination of the dynamic model of pneumatic actuators. We can accurately predict with our test-bed the nonlinear hysteresis and creep effects that were measured. The viscoelastic behaviors contribute to hysteresis and creep in an actuator, and will also limit the allowable frequencies of operation.

[8] reports that the main cause for hysteresis in the McKibben muscle is Coulomb friction between the braided mesh shell and the internal bladder. An experiment was made to illustrate the hysteresis (Fig. 9).

The Fig. 10 indicates that the PAM displays significant creep, likely due to its highly viscoelastic nature. This large amount of creep means that the actuator would need to be warmed up before it could be effectively used.

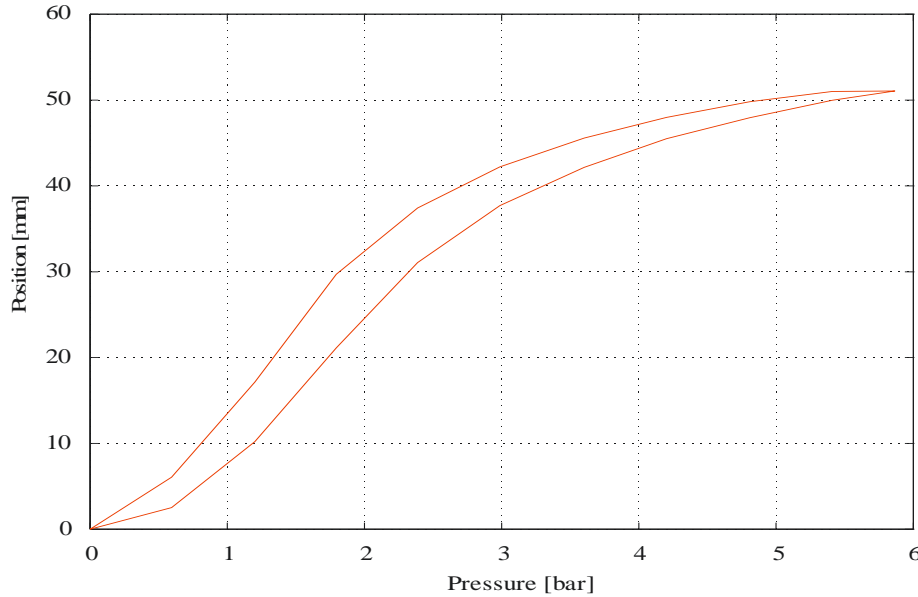


Figure 9. Measured hysteresis loop of PAM

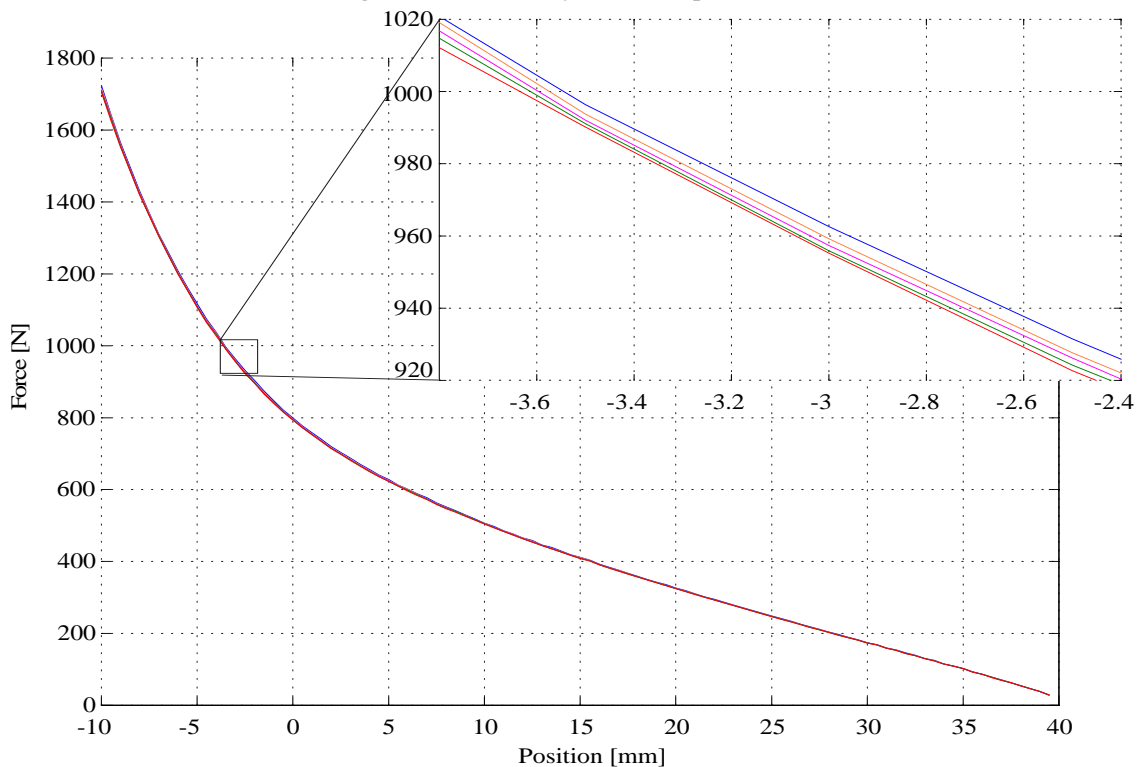


Figure 10. Measured creep effect of PAM

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper presented the mechanical structure of our test-bed that is capable of carrying out several static and dynamic investigations of PAMs. The results are a study on PAMs that have the potential for use in robotic and prosthesis applications. The future work for this project is to show that the fluidic muscle can be used as a good approximation of the biological muscle. These muscles seem a better choice than present day electric or other drives.

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