A Role of Filaments in the Axisymmetrization of an Isolated Two-Dimensional Elliptic Vortex with a Non-Uniform Vorticity Distribution

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We numerically examine the role of filaments in the axisymmetrization of an isolated elliptic vortex with a non-uniform vorticity distribution for a two-dimensional incompressible barotropic fluid. To quantitatively examine the role of filaments in the axisymmetrization, we first divide the vorticity field into a core region and a surrounding region. The former corresponds to the core of the vortex, and the latter corresponds to the filaments and a weak vorticity region just outside the vortex core. Second, we analyze the radial displacement of the maximum and minimum curvature points on a vorticity contour in the core region advected by velocities induced by the vorticity of those regions. This investigation shows that the vorticity of the surrounding region largely contributes to the axisymmetrization at both points, especially when the filaments are forming. Thus, we conclude that the filaments play a significant role in the axisymmetrization of the isolated elliptic vortex.

1. INTRODUCTION

Large-scale atmospheric and oceanic motions on the earth are turbulent. Moreover planetary rotation and density stratification tend to make the atmospheric and oceanic motions horizontally two dimensional. To examine such aspects of atmospheric and oceanic motions, two-dimensional turbulence has been actively studied for a long time. It is well known that the vorticity field of decaying two-dimensional turbulence is full of long-lived and isolated vortices (McWilliams 1984). Thus, understanding vortex motion would be helpful for understanding two-dimensional turbulence.

Melander et al. (1987) studied the axisymmetrization process of an isolated elliptic vortex with a non-uniform, positive vorticity distribution for a two-dimensional incompressible barotropic fluid. They regarded both a vorticity contour near the vortex core and the associated stream function contour near the vorticity contour as to be ellipses. Furthermore, they proposed the axisymmetrization principle,

\[ \frac{d r}{d t} \phi_d \leq 0. \]

(1)

Here, \( r \) is the aspect ratio of the vorticity contour, and \( \phi_d \) is the difference angle between the orientations of the vorticity contour and the nearby stream function contour. Because the velocity vector is tangent to the stream function contour, eq. (1) indicates that when \( \phi_d > 0 \), inward radial velocity is induced at the point of maximum curvature of the elliptic vorticity contour, whereas

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1If the elliptic vortex has negative vorticity, eq. (1) changes as \( \frac{d r}{d t} \phi_d \geq 0 \).
outward radial velocity is induced at the point of minimum curvature (Fig.1). Therefore, when \( \phi_d > 0 \), the velocity field near the elliptic vorticity contour tends to axisymmetrize the vortex. The axisymmetrization principle was confirmed by their numerical experiments.\(^2\)

Melander et al. (1987)\(^2\) discussed qualitatively that the angle \( \phi_d \) can be non-zero when the vorticity field is distorted from the mirror symmetry of an ellipse due to the generation of filaments. Therefore, they concluded that isolated elliptic vortices relax toward axisymmetry as a result of filament generation. However, until now, no one has investigated the contribution of the filaments to \( \phi_d \) and the quantitative relationship between \( \phi_d \) and the velocity field on the vorticity contour.

In this study, we numerically investigate the axisymmetrization of an isolated elliptic vortex in a direct and quantitative fashion. We define a core region and a surrounding region, and we then investigate the contribution of those regions to the axisymmetrization of an elliptic vortex.

2. GOVERNING EQUATION AND SETTINGS OF THE NUMERICAL EXPERIMENT

In this section, we describe the governing equation and settings of our numerical experiment. Moreover, we describe a method for defining the core region and the surrounding region of the vortex.

2.1 GOVERNING EQUATION AND SIMULATION CONDITIONS

The governing equation is the vorticity equation for a two-dimensional incompressible barotropic fluid,

\[
\frac{\partial \omega}{\partial t} + J(\psi, \omega) = \nu \nabla^2 \omega,
\]

where \( \psi \) is the stream function, \( \omega = \nabla^2 \psi \) is the vorticity, \( \nu \) is the viscosity coefficient, and \( J(\psi, \omega) = \partial_x \psi \partial_y \omega - \partial_y \psi \partial_x \omega \) is the Jacobian. The velocity field is given by \( \mathbf{k} \times \nabla \psi \), where \( \mathbf{k} \) is the unit vector
perpendicular to the x-y plane. We apply doubly periodic boundary conditions to the rectangular domain with $2\pi \times 2\pi$. An initial vorticity field is given by

$$\omega(r) = \omega_0 \left[ 1 - \exp \left\{ -C \frac{R_0}{r} \exp \left( -\frac{R_0}{R_0 - r} \right) \right\} \right], \quad 0 \leq r < R_0,$$

where $r = \sqrt{ax^2 + by^2}$, and $\sqrt{a/b}$ is the initial aspect ratio of the vortex. We also set $C = -\frac{1}{2}\frac{a^2}{b} \ln \frac{1}{2} \approx 2.5608517$, $R_0 = \pi/2$, $\omega_0 = 10$, $(a, b) = (10, 1)$, and $\nu = 1.5 \times 10^{-5}$. These parameter values are same as those for the compact-support case in Kimura and Herring (2001).\(^3\)

We use the third-order Adams-Bashforth scheme for time stepping and the pseudospectral method dealiased with the two-third rule at $3072^2$ resolution. The vorticity equation (2) is integrated until $t = 15$.

2.2 DIAGNOSTICS

Until now, objective definitions of the core and filaments of a vortex were not known. Instead of a direct definition of the filaments, we divide the snapshot of the vorticity field into two parts, a core region and a surrounding region. We identify an outermost vorticity contour that remains elliptical throughout the integration and choose it as the boundary to divide the vorticity field into the core region and the surrounding region. Then, we define the core region such that $\omega(x, y) \geq \omega_{th}$ and the surrounding region as $\omega(x, y) < \omega_{th}$, where $\omega_{th}$ is the value of the vorticity of the outermost contour. For the appropriate threshold value that satisfied the above condition, we use $\omega_{th} = 6$. If we slightly vary the threshold value, the result presented below does not change qualitatively.

We consider the evolution of the vorticity contour with $\omega = 6, 7$ and 8 in the core region. We also focus on the stream function contours with values near the vorticity contours of interest. The values of the stream function contours are selected as the mean values of the stream function at the maximum and minimum curvature points of the vorticity contours.

The vorticity and the stream function contours of interest are regarded as ellipses similar to the work of Melander et al. (1987).\(^2\) The contours are fit to ellipses by least-square fitting (Fitzgibbon et al. 1999\(^4\)).

In the two-dimensional turbulence, the Okubo-Weiss criterion (Okubo 1970\(^5\); Weiss 1991\(^6\)) and the Hua-Klein criterion (Hua and Klein 1998\(^7\)) are often used to select the core regions of vortices.\(^8\) When these criteria are solely used, they select not only a core region but also some fraction of the filaments. To remove some fraction of the filaments, additional conditions, for example the absolute value of the vorticity must be larger than a threshold value, or the pressure must be negative, are usually required.\(^8, 9\) Instead, we use simpler method described above to extract the core region.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISOLATED VORTEX

In this section, we briefly describe the temporal evolution of the elliptic vortex. Fig.2 shows the time evolution of the vorticity field. Filaments are formed during the early stage of evolution, rotated around the vortex center with a slower speed than the vortex core, and simultaneously elongated. Filaments are formed again in $7 \lesssim t \lesssim 8$. At the end of the evolution, a weak vorticity region uniformly surrounds the vortex core. The aspect ratio of the vortex greatly decreases compared with the initial aspect ratio.

Fig.3 shows the time evolution of the aspect ratio of the vorticity contours, $\omega = 6, 7, 8$. The aspect ratio of the vorticity contours rapidly decreases until $t \lesssim 1.5$. After that, it oscillates during evolution with periods of $T = 1 \sim 1.8$. 
Figure 2: Time evolution of the vorticity field at some instant of time. Only a quarter of the computational domain is shown.

Figure 3: Time evolution of the aspect ratio of the vorticity contours with $\omega = 6$ (solid line), 7 (broken line), 8 (dotted line).

Figure 4: Time series of the difference angle, $\phi_d$ (solid line), and the rate of change of the aspect ratio, $dr/dt$ (broken line), for the vorticity contour with $\omega = 6$.

Fig. 4 shows the evolution of the difference angle, $\phi_d$, and the rate of change of the aspect ratio, $dr/dt$. The axisymmetrization principle, $\phi_d \frac{dr}{dt} \leq 0$, proposed by Melander et al. (1987) is well satisfied by our simulation.

Note that the aspect ratios of the vorticity contours show a short time increase in $6 \leq t \leq 7$. This can be explained by the reattachment of the filaments to the core, which generates a strong anti-mirror symmetric vorticity field near the core corresponding to $\phi_d < 0$.

Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 show the snapshots of the core region and the surrounding region of the vorticity field, respectively. Fig. 5 shows that all of the vorticity contours in the core regions remain nearly
elliptical; therefore, the core regions are successfully defined by the procedure described in section 2.2. Fig.6 shows that the surrounding regions consist of the filaments and the weak vorticity region around the core.

3.2 CONTRIBUTION OF FILAMENTS TO THE AXISYMMETRIZATION OF AN ELLIPTIC VORTEX

To reveal the axisymmetrization of an elliptic vortex, we focus on the deformations of vorticity contours in the core region by the vorticity of the core region and the surrounding region. First, we analyze the radial velocity at the maximum and minimum curvature points of the vorticity contours. We divide the velocity into two parts: the velocities induced by the vorticity field in the core region, $\mathbf{u}_c := \mathbf{k} \times \nabla \Delta^{-1} \omega_c$, and by those in the surrounding region, $\mathbf{u}_s := \mathbf{k} \times \nabla \Delta^{-1} \omega_s$, where $\omega_c$ and $\omega_s$ are the vorticity fields in the core region and the surrounding region, respectively. Using these velocities, we calculate the integral of the velocities with respect to time,

$$A_c(t) := \int_0^t \mathbf{u}_c(t') \cdot e_r \, dt', \quad A_s(t) := \int_0^t \mathbf{u}_s(t') \cdot e_r \, dt',$$

where $e_r$ is a radial unit vector. Because the vorticity is frozen to the fluid particle for a two-dimensional incompressible barotropic fluid, the above integrals represent contributions of each region to the displacements of the vorticity contour. That is, $A_c$ and $A_s$ are displacements of the vorticity contour advected by the velocities induced by the core region and the surrounding region, respectively.

Fig.7 shows the evolution of $A_c$ and $A_s$ at the maximum curvature point of the vorticity contour, $\omega = 6, 7, 8$. $A_s$ for all the contours rapidly decreases in $0 < t \lesssim 1.5$ and exhibits a relatively small decrease in $7 \lesssim t \lesssim 8$. As shown in section 3.1, these time intervals correspond to the intervals during filament formation. At the maximum curvature point, $A_s$ and $A_c$ are always negative, but the magnitude of $A_c$ is small compared with that of $A_s$. On the other hand, $A_s$ at the minimum curvature point increases during approximately the same interval when $A_s$ at the maximum curvature point decreases (Fig.8). This indicates that the surrounding region contributes to the axisymmetrization of the elliptic vortex. The surrounding region consists of the filaments and the weak vorticity region around the vortex core. The weak vorticity region, which homogeneously surrounds the vortex core, does not contribute to the axisymmetrization because the mirror-symmetric vorticity field cannot
Figure 7: Time evolution of $A_c(t)$ and $A_s(t)$ at the maximum curvature point.

Figure 8: Time evolution of $A_c(t)$ and $A_s(t)$ at the minimum curvature point.

contribute to $\phi_0$, that is, to the axisymmetrization\(^2\) (Fig.9). The facts that the axisymmetrization occurs during filament formation and that the weak vorticity region is almost mirror symmetric strongly suggest that the filaments are the main cause of the axisymmetrization.

4. CONCLUSION

We have quantitatively discussed the axisymmetrization of an isolated elliptic vortex with a non-uniform vorticity distribution for a two-dimensional incompressible barotropic fluid. To investigate the role of filaments in the axisymmetrization of an elliptic vortex, we defined a core and surrounding regions. We investigated the deformations of the vorticity contours in the vortex core by velocities induced by the core and the surrounding regions. The deformations of the vorticity contours due to the surrounding region were significant, particularly when the filaments were forming. This investigation showed that the filaments substantially contributed to the axisymmetrization of the elliptic vortex.
Figure 9: Snapshots of anti-mirror symmetric vorticity fields on the principal axes of the ellipse with $\omega = 6$. The coordinates are rotated so that the major axis of the ellipse with $\omega = 6$ is coincident with $y$-axis.

These analyses of the contribution of the surrounding region did not reveal which part of the filaments contributed the most to the axisymmetrization and how they contributed to the axisymmetrization. A study clarifying these points is currently underway and will be reported in a paper that is in preparation.

We discussed the role of filaments in the axisymmetrization for the compact-support initial vorticity distribution. We confirm that the result for the compact-support distribution, which is monotonically decreasing function with radial directions measured from the center of the vortex core, also holds for other initial vorticity distributions, such as a Gaussian distribution used by Kimura and Herring (2001) and a discontinuous distribution used by Dritschel (1998). A detailed analysis of initial distributions will be presented in a paper that is in preparation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

One of the authors (SM) has been supported by the CPS under the auspices of the MEXT GCOE Program, entitled “Foundation of the international education and research center for planetary science”. The GFD-DENNOU Library was used for drawing some figures. This work was also partly supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research No.20540424 and 21654065 from the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science.

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