The Influence of Casting Methods on Microstructure of Al-Mg-Sc-Zr Alloy

Michaela Šlapáková¹, Barbora Krivská¹, Olexandr Grydin², Miroslav Cieslar¹
¹Charles University, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Ke Karlovu 5, Praha 2, Czech Republic. E-mail: sla-pakova@karlov.mff.cuni.cz, krivska.barbora@seznam.cz, cieslar@met.mff.cuni.cz
²University Paderborn, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Lehrstuhl für Werkstoffkunde Microscopy, Pohlweg 47-49, 33098 Paderborn, Germany. E-mail: olexandr.grydin@uni-paderborn.de

Two methods of fabrication of Al-Mg-Sc-Zr alloy are compared - conventional casting followed by cold-rolling and twin-roll casting. To the advantages of twin-roll casting belong the lower material and energy requirements during the production. However, twin-roll cast material exhibits different initial microstructure and routes established for conventionally cast materials cannot be applied. In twin-roll cast material the distribution of primary particles is more inhomogeneous - they form segregation near the center and edges of the sheet and their average size is smaller. On the contrary, the average sub-grain size is much higher in the twin-roll cast material.

Keywords: Al-Mg, Twin-roll casting, Conventional casting, Central segregation, Particles distribution

1 Introduction

Al-Mg-based alloys are widely used in aerospace and ship-building industry due to their excellent weldability, reasonable corrosion resistance and possibility of super-plastic forming [1-3]. Additional alloying with Sc and Zr offers a great potential for developing of new lightweight structural materials with exceptional mechanical properties thanks to presence of Al₃(Sc,Zr) precipitates which strengthen the alloy and increase the thermal stability [4-7].

One of the disadvantages of the Al-Mg type of alloys is that they may suffer from exfoliation corrosion [3,4]. Generally, exfoliation corrosion occurs when a highly directional microstructure is present in the material. Such is typical for sheets and strips produced by rolling of initial ingots. Therefore, new manufacturing processes minimizing the formation of a pancake structure with flat and elongated grains are under current research.

Twin-roll casting (TRC) is a typical example of manufacturing method, which enables casting of strips directly with the thickness requested for semi-finished product [8,9]. The most significant feature of this technology is a formation of rather equiaxed grains, in contrast to ones generated by a rolling procedure. However, the differences in the processing route compared to direct chill (DC) cast materials (omission of steps like homogenization, scalping, rolling and intermediate) leads to formation of a structure with appreciable different features [10,11]. Therefore, processing routes for TRC materials must be modified from those established for DC cast materials. Recently, the manufacturing and modification of high-strength Al-Mg-Si and Al-Mg-based alloys prepared by TRC are under intensive research [12,13]. However, there are only sparse information concerning the preparation and properties of TRC materials containing Zr and Sc [14,15].

In the present work two variants of Al-Mg-Sc-Zr alloy are compared regarding the microstructure and primary particles distribution.
Fig. 1 Comparison of the particles distribution in the twin-roll cast (left) and conventionally cast (right) materials. The regions near the edge of the strip (top), in the bulk of the material (center) and in the central part of the sheet (bottom) are depicted. Viewed in the transversal direction.
Fig. 2 Detailed SEM image of the two main types of particles present in the twin-roll cast (left) and conventionally cast (right) materials.

Fig. 3 EDS maps for chemical analysis of particles present in the studied material – Al, Fe, Mg and Si. The matrix contains mainly aluminium, dark particles are MgSi, bright particles are rich in iron and some areas within the segregation are rich in magnesitum.

The segregations near the surfaces are characteristic with higher particle density than the bulk of the material, where the particles are distributed evenly at the grain boundaries. The thickness of the enriched strip near the surface varies from 100 to 300 µm. Several larger segregates under the surface region were also observed.
Two main types of particles were observed in both types of materials. Their chemical composition was determined by energy dispersive spectroscopy in SEM. The white particles are rich in iron; the black particles are Mg$_2$Si phase. An example of the elements distribution map (Al, Mg, Si and Fe) is given in Figure 3. These two types of particles were observed in both the twin-roll cast and conventionally cast materials. In addition, in the TRC material areas within the macrosegregation contained regions rich in Mg (without Si) – compare the red areas in Figure 3.

The relative size of both types of the primary particles in both materials can be compared in Figure 2. The detailed analysis of the particle size and shape distribution within the whole thickness of the strip revealed that both the particle size and area fraction is higher in the conventionally cast material. The high cooling rate during twin-roll casting may be responsible for the lower particle density as during the short time of solidification lower amount of solutes forms primary particles and the rest remains in the solid solution, causing the solid solution supersaturation which is typical for various twin-roll cast aluminium alloys [18].

In the conventionally cast material the average size of the Fe-rich particles is 1.5 µm and of Mg$_2$Si 1 µm, the area fraction is 0.75 % and 0.35 %, respectively. In the twin-roll cast material the distribution is not homogeneous. The overall particle size is 1.2 and 0.7 µm for the Fe-rich and Mg$_2$Si particles, respectively, and the area fraction 1.2 % and 0.15 %. The area fraction in the central part and near the surfaces reaches 2.5 % and 1 % for the Fe-rich and Mg$_2$Si particles, respectively.

As lower amount of Mg formed Mg$_2$Si primary particles in the TRC material, the areas rich in Mg formed – within the central segregation, see Figure 3.

Detailed images from TEM (Figure 4) reveal other differences in the materials caused by different casting procedures. The subgrain size is much higher in the TRC material and also the dislocation density is much lower compared to the conventionally cast and rolled material – such huge change in the dislocation density was caused mainly by the rolling step in the material processing. Moreover, the elongation of subgrains is also apparent in the conventionally cast material. This observation confirmed the previous results [19] from light optical microscopy which revealed the shape of the whole grains – elongated in the conventionally cast materials and rather equiaxed in the twin-roll cast material.

Fig. 4 Detailed observation of the microstructure (mainly subgrains) by TEM of the twin-roll cast (left) and conventionally cast (right) material.

4 Conclusion

Twin-roll cast material, compared to the conventionally cast one after rolling to the comparable thickness, has less homogeneous distribution of primary phases and suffers from macrosegregation, both near the strip surface and in the center of the strip. Two types of primary particles were observed in both materials – iron rich phase and Mg$_2$Si. Moreover, Mg-rich regions appeared within the segregations in the twin-roll cast material. The average particle size is smaller in the twin-roll cast material.

The subgrains are smaller and elongated with higher density of dislocations in the conventionally cast material.

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