Effects of finite curvature on soliton dynamics in a chain of nonlinear oscillators

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Abstract. We consider a curved chain of nonlinear oscillators and show that the interplay of curvature and nonlinearity leads to a number of qualitative effects. In particular, the energy of nonlinear localized excitations centered on the bending decreases when curvature increases, i.e. bending manifests itself as a trap for excitations. Moreover, the potential of this trap is double-well, thus leading to a symmetry breaking phenomenon: a symmetric stationary state may become unstable and transform into an energetically favorable asymmetric stationary state. The essentials of symmetry breaking are examined analytically for a simplified model. We also demonstrate a threshold character of the scattering process, i.e. transmission, trapping, or reflection of the moving nonlinear excitation passing through the bending.

1. Introduction

Recently, determination of the dynamical properties of physical systems with nontrivial geometry has attracted a growing interest because of their wide applicability in various physical and biophysical problems. Examples are biological macromolecules, nanotubes, microtubules, vesicles, electronic and photonic wave-guide structures [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]; the gene transcription is usually accompanied by a local DNA bending [4, 5, 6]; the electronic properties of carbon nanotubes drastically depend on their chirality [7]; T-shape junctions were recently proposed [8] as nanoscale metal-semiconductor-metal contact devices; periodically spaced, curved optical waveguides were proposed for observation of optical Bloch oscillations [9].

The geometry manifests itself in particular in creation of linear quasi-bound states (see e.g. [10, 11]). On the other hand, it is well known that the balance between nonlinearity and dispersion provides an existence of spatially localized soliton-like excitations. Taken together these two localization mechanisms compete and one may expect that the interplay of geometry and nonlinearity can lead to qualitatively new effects.

An example of nonlinearity-induced change of the geometry of the system can be found in Ref. [12] where the classical Heisenberg model on an infinite elastic cylinder was
considered. It was shown that a periodic topological spin soliton induces a periodic pinch of the cylindrical manifold. These results are applicable to microtubules and vesicles comprised of magnetic organic materials [13]. The stationary lasing of the modes in a microdisk was investigated in Ref. [17] where it was shown that nonlinear whispering gallery modes exist in the microdisk above some finite pumping thresholds.

In this paper we consider a curved chain of nonlinear oscillators which is described by the nonlinear Schrödinger (NLS) model with the coupling coefficients depending on the distance between oscillators. This model has been in particular used as an approximation to the nonlinear dynamics of biological macromolecules, such as proteins [18, 19, 20] and DNA [21]. It was shown that nonlinear excitations should play a key part in the biological functioning of such molecular chains. However, usually they are investigated on the assumption that the chain has straight rod-like configuration. On the other hand, thermodynamical properties of these macromolecules cannot be understood without taking into account their flexibility and existence of non-trivial spatial configurations. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that non-trivial spatial configurations should play a part in nonlinear dynamics of the macromolecules. In particular, the DNA molecule is usually hooked [4, 8, 9] by the RNA-polymerase which binds to the promoter segment of DNA and then initiates the DNA transcription.

This raises the interesting question of whether a non-trivial spatial configuration of the chain could introduce some new qualitative effects into the nonlinear dynamics of the system? In the present paper we demonstrate some of such effects on the example of the chain with a single parabolic bending. In Sec. 2 we describe the model and present the results of numerical calculations of stationary excitations. In particular, we discuss the multistability phenomenon and curvature-induced symmetry breaking in the spectrum of nonlinear excitations. In Sec. 3 we analyze analytically a minimal model which gives qualitatively the same behavior as the original model. In Sec. 4 we consider dynamical properties of nonlinear excitations, in particular scattering of the moving excitations by the chain bending. Section 5 presents the concluding discussion.

2. System and equations of motion

The model we study is described by the Hamiltonian

\[ H = \sum_n \left\{ 2|\psi_n|^2 - \sum_{m \neq n} J_{n,m} |\psi_n^*\psi_m - \frac{1}{2} |\psi_n|^4 \right\}, \tag{1} \]

where \( \psi_n(t) \) is the complex amplitude at the site \( n \) (\( n = 0, \pm 1, \pm 2, \ldots \)). For instance in the case of the two-strand DNA model [22], \( \psi \) is the complex amplitude of the base-pair stretching vibration. We assume that the excitation transfer \( J_{n,m} \) in the dispersive term depends on the distance in the embedding space between the sites \( n \) and \( m \): \( J_{n,m} \equiv J(|\vec{r}_n - \vec{r}_m|) \), where the radius-vector \( \vec{r}_n = (x_n, y_n, z_n) \) characterizes spatial position of the site \( n \). Of course, when \( J_{n,m} \) models electromagnetic coupling between dipoles, this coefficient will depend also on the relative angles. However, in
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Figure 1. The curved chain under consideration and the corresponding effective double-well potential $U$ and mass $m$, created by the bending.

some cases such dependence is not present. E.g., for the semiflexible ribbon polymers [23] the dipoles are orthogonal to the plane in which the chain can be curved, so that the corresponding interaction would depend only on the distance between the dipoles.

From the Hamiltonian (1) we obtain the equation of motion in the form

$$i\frac{d}{dt}\psi_n - 2\psi_n + \sum_{m \neq n} J_{n,m} \psi_m + |\psi_n|^2 \psi_n = 0.$$  

(2)

The Hamiltonian $H$ and the number of excitations (quanta) $N = \sum_n |\psi_n|^2$ are both conserved quantities. The sites are assumed to be equidistantly placed on a planar envelope curve.

We consider the properties of nonlinear excitations in the vicinity of the bends where the envelope curve can be modeled by a parabola (see the top part of Fig. 1): $y_n = \kappa x_n^2 / 2$ and $z_n = 0$ with $\kappa$ being the inverse radius of curvature at the bending point. We assume that the chain is inextensible that is the distance between neighboring sites is constant: $|\vec{r}_{n+1} - \vec{r}_n| = 1$ for all $n$ and $\kappa$. Therefore, when $\kappa$ is not too large ($|\vec{r}_m - \vec{r}_n| > 1$ for all $|n - m| > 1$) the excitation dynamics does not depend on the curvature of the system in the nearest-neighbor approximation, when $J_{n,m} = J\delta_{n-m,\pm 1}$.

In many physical problems, however, the nearest-neighbor approximation is too crude. For example, effective dispersive interaction between nonlinear layers in nonlinear dielectric superlattices is exponential, $\exp(-\alpha r)$, with the inverse radius $\alpha$ depending on parameters of the lattice (superlattice spacing, linear refractive index and so on) [24]. In the framework of the Peyrard-Bishop model [25, 26] the nonlinear dynamics of the DNA molecule can be described by Eq. (2) with nonlinear term of the opposite sign (because of the repulsive anharmonicity). In this case $\psi$ is the complex amplitude of the base-pair stretching vibration [22]. The base-pairs (AT, GC) in the DNA molecule are usually asymmetric (see, e.g., [1]), and therefore the vibration which corresponds to the stretching of the hydrogen bonds connecting the two bases, transfers along the chain due to the dipole-dipole interaction decaying with the distance $r$ as $1/r^3$. Since the dipole moments of base-pairs are almost perpendicular to the molecular axis
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Figure 2. Dependence of the spectrum of linear excitations on the curvature of the chain for $\alpha = 2$ and $J = 6.4$. Localized linear bound states emerge above (symmetric states) and below (antisymmetric states) the continuum spectrum of extended states.

Figure 3. Profiles of the linear bound states from Fig. 2 for $\kappa = 15$.

For stationary states, $\psi_n(t) = \phi_n(\Lambda) e^{i\Lambda t}$, where $\Lambda$ is the nonlinear frequency and
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Figure 4. Number of excitations \( N(\Lambda) \) for the straight chain (\( \kappa = 0 \); dot-dashed line) and curved chain (\( \kappa = 3 \); solid lines for stable states, dashed lines for the states unstable with respect to the breathing mode, and dotted line for the states unstable with respect to the Peierls mode) for \( \alpha = 2 \) and \( J = 6.4 \). In the inset shapes of the symmetric (s) and asymmetric (as) stationary states for \( N = 3.6 \) are shown.

\( \phi_n(\Lambda) \) is the excitation amplitude of the \( n \)-th site, Eq. (2) reduces to the system of nonlinear algebraic equations

\[
\sum_{m \neq n} J_{nm} \phi_m + \phi_n^3 = (2 + \Lambda) \phi_n ,
\]

which can be solved, for instance, by the Newton-Raphson iterations.

In Fig. 2 we demonstrate that in the linear limit, i.e. when the term \( \phi_n^3 \) in Eq. (3) is neglected, the bending creates at least one linear localized state. The profile of the first bound state, which is always present, is shown in Fig. 3a. When the curvature of the chain increases, new localized states are emerged from the continuum spectrum; their profiles are shown in Fig. 3. As it has been recently proven for another but similar system [28], the number of these bound states can exceed any positive integer provided the chain is curved “enough”.

However, in the present paper we shall study the case of smooth bendings for which only the first bound state is present. In Fig. 4 we plot the dependence of \( N(\Lambda) \) obtained numerically for both, the straight rod-like and curved chains. As may be inferred from this figure, several new features arise as a consequence of the finite curvature.

Specifically, there appears a gap at small \( \Lambda \) in which no localized solution can exist. As can be seen from Fig. 2, this gap originates from the existence of the linear two-hump bound state discussed above.

In the case of curved chain there are two branches of stationary states: a branch of symmetric localized excitations (s), which exists for all values of \( N \), and a branch of asymmetric localized excitations (as), which exists only for \( N > N_{th}(\kappa) \). The threshold value \( N_{th}(\kappa) \) decreases when \( \kappa \) decreases and vanishes in the limit \( \kappa \to 0 \). The symmetric stationary state has a two-humped shape (evolved from the linear two-hump localized
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Figure 5. Energy of symmetric (s) and asymmetric (as) nonlinear excitations versus the curvature $\kappa$ for $\alpha = 2$, $J = 6.4$, and $N = 4$.

mode) while in the asymmetric state the maximum is shifted either to the left or to the right from the center of symmetry $n = 0$ (see inset in Fig. 4).

In contrast to the case of straight rod-like chain (see dot-dashed line in Fig. 4), the dependence $N(\Lambda)$ for the symmetric stationary states in curved chain is non-monotonic. That is, there exist an interval of $N$ in which three different symmetric states coexist for each excitation number; two of them are usually stable [27, 29]. Such bistability phenomenon exists in the straight rod-like chain only for smaller values of $\alpha < 1.7$. Thus, one may conclude that the bending of the chain facilitates the bistability of nonlinear excitations.

The energy of the symmetric as well as asymmetric localized states is monotonically decreasing function of the curvature (see Fig. 5). Thus, one may expect that the nonlinear localized excitation may facilitate bending of flexible molecular chain. For $N > N_{th}(\kappa)$, when symmetric and asymmetric stationary states coexist, the asymmetric state is always energetically more favorable. Taking into account that in the linear limit the ground state of the model is symmetric with respect to the center of symmetry $n = 0$ one can conclude that combined action of the finite curvature and nonlinearity provides the symmetry breaking in the system.

Apart from the smooth bending we studied the case of the wedge: $y_n = |x_n| \tan(\theta)$, and obtained qualitatively the same results. We checked also that the exact form of the dispersive interaction is not of serious concern here. To this end we studied the case when the dispersive interaction has the power dependence on the distance: $J_{n,m} = J|\vec{r}_n - \vec{r}_m|^{-s}$. Qualitatively the same results were obtained for this case, too. The symmetry breaking, which we observe, means that there is a bistability in the spectrum of nonlinear excitations: the excitation can be localized either to the left or to the right of the bending. By applying an external periodic field one can achieve switching between these two states. In this way we may expect a new resonance to appear in the response of the system to a periodic driving.
3. Analytical approach and minimal model

To gain a better insight into the symmetry breaking mechanism, let us consider the continuum limit of the discrete NLS model given by Eqs. (1)–(2). We are interested here in the case when the characteristic size of the excitation is much larger than the lattice spacing. It permits us to replace $\psi_n(t)$ by the function $\psi(\ell, t)$ of the arclength $\ell$ which is the continuum analogue of $n$. Using the Euler-McLaurin summation formula [30] we get

$$H = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \left\{ \frac{1}{2} m(\ell) \left( \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial \ell} \right)^2 + U(\ell) |\psi|^2 - \frac{1}{2} |\psi|^4 \right\} d\ell. \tag{4}$$

Here $m^{-1}(\ell) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} (\ell' - \ell)^2 J_{\ell,\ell'} d\ell'$ is the inverse effective mass of the excitation, and $U(\ell) = - \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} J_{\ell,\ell'} d\ell'$ is the energy shift due to the dispersive interaction. Near the bending point the number of neighbors available for excitation is larger than far away where the curvature is small. Near the bending the effective potential, $U(\ell)$, exhibits a double-well shape. This fact together with the resulting double-well spatial dependence of the effective mass, $m(\ell)$, are the reasons why the excitation is localized. The attractive potential $U(\ell)$ consists of two symmetric wells whose positions ($\pm a$) and depths ($\Delta \equiv U(|\ell| \to \infty) - U(a)$) are determined by the range of the dispersive interaction and the peculiarities of the bending geometry (see Fig. 2). E.g., in the case of the wedge, $y_n = |x_n| \tan(\theta)$, we get for $\theta < \pi/4$

$$U(\ell) = - \frac{J}{\alpha} \left( 2 - e^{-\alpha|\ell|} \right) - J \left\{ \frac{e^{-\alpha|\ell|\cos(2\theta)}}{2} \right\} \alpha |\ell| K_1(\alpha |\ell|) \quad \text{when } \theta < 1/2,$$

where $K_n(z)$ denotes the modified Bessel function [31]. The distance between the potential minima $2a \approx (1 + \theta^2)/\alpha$ and their depth $\Delta \approx 4 e J \theta^2 / \alpha$ increase when the angle $\theta \to \pi/4$. Note that the Hamiltonian similar to Eq. (4) with $U(\ell) \equiv 0$ was introduced in Ref. [31] to study the effects of the DNA bending on breather trapping. The step function dependence of the effective mass $m(\ell)$ was there assumed.

The NLS model (4) is still very difficult to solve analytically. But it is interesting anyway to find a model — chosen as simple as possible — which gives qualitatively the same results as the original model. Such a model can be obtained by using step-wise approximation

$$U(\ell) = - \frac{2J}{\alpha} - \Delta \sum_{\sigma = \pm} (H(\ell - \sigma a + w/2) - H(\ell - \sigma a - w/2)) \tag{5},$$

where $H(x)$ is the Heaviside step-function, $w$ is the width of the potential well. The similar expression can be written for the effective mass $m(\ell)$. In the step-wise approach the stationary equation which corresponds to the Hamiltonian (4) can be solved and the corresponding eigenvalue problem can be explored. However, results obtained in this manner look very cumbersome. Therefore we shall make a further simplification by applying the limit $w \to 0$, keeping the product $w \Delta \equiv \epsilon$ constant in Eq. (4). In this
way we arrive at the following minimal model
\[ i \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial \ell^2} + \epsilon (\delta(\ell - a) + \delta(\ell + a)) \psi + |\psi|^2 \psi = 0 \]
where the gauge-transformation \( \psi \to \psi \exp(-i2Jt/\alpha) \) was used. Introducing into Eq. (6) the stationary state ansatz \( \psi(\ell, t) = \phi(\ell) \exp(i\Lambda) \) where \( \phi(\ell) \to 0 \) when \( |\ell| \to \infty \), we find that
\[
\phi(\ell) = \begin{cases} 
\sqrt{2\Lambda} \text{sech} \left( \sqrt{\Lambda} (\ell - \ell_{-1}) \right) & \text{when } \ell < -a, \\
\sqrt{2\Lambda} \frac{(1 - m)}{2 - m} \text{nd} \left( \sqrt{\frac{\Lambda}{2 - m}} (\ell - \ell_0) \mid m \right) & \text{when } |\ell| < a, \\
\sqrt{2\Lambda} \text{sech} \left( \sqrt{\Lambda} (\ell - \ell_1) \right) & \text{when } \ell > a
\end{cases}
\]
where \( pq(u \mid m) \) (p, q = c, s, d, n) are the Jacobi elliptic functions with the modulus \( m \). The parameters \( \ell_{\pm 1}, \ell_0, \) and \( m \) are determined from the relations
\[
\text{sech} \left( \sqrt{\Lambda} (a \mp \ell_{\pm 1}) \right) = \sqrt{\frac{1 - m}{2 - m}} \text{nd} \left( \sqrt{\frac{\Lambda}{2 - m}} (a \mp \ell_0) \mid m \right),
\]
\[
F(\ell_0, m) \equiv \sqrt{1 - m (1 - m) \text{sd}^2(u_+ \mid m)} + m \text{sd}(u_+ \mid m) \text{cn}(u_+ \mid m) - \sqrt{1 - m (1 - m) \text{sd}^2(u_- \mid m)} + m \text{sd}(u_- \mid m) \text{cn}(u_- \mid m) = 0,
\]
\[
\sqrt{1 - m (1 - m) \text{sd}^2(u_\pm \mid m)} + m \text{sd}(u_\pm \mid m) \text{cn}(u_\pm \mid m) = \sqrt{\frac{2 - m}{\Lambda}} \epsilon ,
\]
where \( u_\pm = \sqrt{\Lambda/(2 - m)} (a \pm \ell_0) \). Using the above expressions one can evaluate the number of excitations which corresponds to the stationary solution
\[
N = 4 (\sqrt{\Lambda} - \epsilon) + 2 \sqrt{\frac{\Lambda}{2 - m}} \sum_{\sigma = \pm 1} E(\text{am}(u_\sigma) \mid m)
\]
where \( a_m(u) \) is the amplitude and \( E(\phi \mid m) \) is the elliptic integral of the second kind \[30\].

The equation \( F(\ell_0, m) = 0 \) always has a solution \( \ell_0 = 0 \). This corresponds to the symmetric two-hump wave function \( \phi(\ell) \). In addition, \( \ell_0 \neq 0 \) solutions appear for \( \Lambda \geq \Lambda_c \) with the threshold value \( \Lambda_c \) being determined from the condition \( \partial F/\partial \ell_0 = 0 \) for \( \ell_0 = 0 \). In other words, a symmetry-breaking bifurcation to a doubly degenerate branch of asymmetric solutions occurs in the point \( \Lambda = \Lambda_c \). It follows from Eq. \[7\] that the symmetry-breaking bifurcation is determined by the equation

\[
(1 - 2\text{sn}^2 + m \text{sn}^4) \sqrt{1 - 2m \text{sn}^2 + m^2 \text{sn}^2} = (1 - m) \text{sn} \text{cn} \equiv \text{sn} \left( \sqrt{\Lambda/(2 - m)} \mid m \right).
\]

The results of the analytical consideration of the nonlinear eigenvalue problem based on Eqs. \[7\] and \[8\] are shown in Fig. 6. As in the original model the stationary state (s) is unique and symmetric for small number of quanta \( N \). But when the number of quanta exceeds some critical value there are two stationary states: symmetric (s) and asymmetric (as), with the asymmetric state being energetically favorable. Thus, similarly to the original model, the minimal model demonstrates a symmetry breaking effect (localization in one of the wells). It is worth noting that a closely related phenomenon was observed in Ref. \[32\] where nonlinear electromagnetic waves in a symmetric planar waveguide were studied. But in contrast to our case the nonlinear Schrödinger model with a step-wise nonlinearity was considered.

4. Dynamical properties of excitations

The dynamical properties of nonlinear excitations include both, the behavior of immobile stationary excitations when they lose stability, and a scattering of the moving excitations by the bending.
The first issue has been considered in details in Ref. [33] where we have shown that the symmetric two-humped stationary state can lose stability in two ways, due to softening of the antisymmetric Peierls internal mode and due to softening of the symmetric breathing mode. A typical evolution of the symmetric stationary state in the case when it becomes unstable with respect to the Peierls mode is shown in Fig. 7. One can see that the two-humped initial symmetric state evolves into an asymmetric state with an excited breathing internal mode.

In this paper we consider in more details another item which is very intriguing from the viewpoint of possible applications: the scattering of moving excitations in their passage through the center of the bending. To accomplish it, we first obtained a stationary moving excitation by pushing (i.e., taking $\psi_n(0) = \phi_n(\Lambda)e^{ikn}$ with some $k$ and $\Lambda$) of the initially unmoving stationary state $\phi_n$ found numerically for the straight chain as described in Sec. 2. Eventually, evolving over the course of 5000 time units, the excitation reached almost stationary form. Substituting it into the curved chain far away from the bending, we found out that the destiny of the excitation in passing though the bending region is strongly dependent on the curvature $\kappa$ of the chain.

In Fig. 8 we plot the eventual velocity $v_{sc}(\kappa)$ of the excitation with $N = 2.39$ and initial velocity $v = 0.37$. One can see that for small $\kappa$ ($\kappa < 0.2$) the bending does not practically change the excitation velocity. However, for $0.2 < \kappa < 1.07$ the transmission becomes clearly inelastic, leading to decreasing of the excitation velocity. The excitation passes the bending region leaving behind a part of its energy for exciting of the linear bound state (see Fig. 9a).

In the interval $1.07 < \kappa < 2.1$ the excitation is captured by the bending (see Fig. 9b), so that in this case the bending clearly manifests itself as an effective trap. Similar phenomenon has been previously considered [31] as an effective breather trapping
Figure 9. Density plot of $|\psi_n(t)|^2$ which demonstrates scattering of the moving excitation from Fig. 8 for different values of $\kappa$: (a) 1.05, (b) 1.5, (c) 2.5, and (d) 3.0.

In conclusion, we have shown that the interplay of curvature and nonlinearity in the chain of nonlinear oscillators can lead to the qualitative effects, such as symmetry mechanism for DNA transcription in the case of curved DNA. However, in Ref. [31] the bending has been accounted effectively, postulating some modification of the coupling constants around it.

Finally, for $2.1 < \kappa < 2.6$ the excitation is reflected from the bending, however a significant part of the initial excitation energy remains captured near the bending region (see Fig. 9c). In contrast, for $\kappa > 2.6$ the main part of the excitation energy is reflected from the bending and only small part is captured (see Fig. 9d).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we have shown that the interplay of curvature and nonlinearity in the chain of nonlinear oscillators can lead to the qualitative effects, such as symmetry
breaking of the nonlinear excitations and their trapping by the bending. We have demonstrated that the energy of nonlinear excitations decreases with the increasing of curvature of the chain and thus one can expect that the presence of nonlinear localized excitation in the chain may facilitate its bending, if only the chain is flexible enough.

These effects are tolerant to the choice of the coupling coefficients $J_{nm}$. In particular, qualitatively the same properties were obtained for the case of the dipole-dipole dispersive interaction with $J_{nm} = |\vec{r}_n - \vec{r}_m|^{-3}$. Specifically, in the case of the Davydov-Scott model \cite{13, 19} with the dipole-dipole coupling between sites \cite{20} for the parameters which characterize the motion of the amide-I excitation in proteins (they correspond to $N = 0.64$ in our model) decreasing of the ground state energy due to a trapping by the bending with $\kappa = 1$ ($\kappa = 3$) comprise 10% (46%) of the whole excitation energy. This may be also important for the dynamics of DNA molecule and in particular for DNA melting where in accordance with Peyrard-Bishop model \cite{25, 26} the nonlinear properties of base-pairs vibrations play a crucial role.

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