Control of Steel Detachment and Metal Flow on Aluminum-steel Friction Stir Welding of Thin Joints

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Abstract

In the last thirty years, the friction stir welding (FSW) process has achieved significant importance due to the satisfactory results derived from severe deformation and low heat input during the welded joint production. These elements have been considered to implement the FSW in different welded systems, including aluminum-steel joints. In these dissimilar joints, the main interest was to obtain a welded joint with acceptable mechanical behavior. Some papers recently focused on understanding dissimilar joints process, mainly on the metal flow and its response to corrosion. However, in Al-steel joints, the presence of steel particles in the nugget zone is routine, it alters both the mechanical and chemical behavior of welded joints. Thus, this work aims to evaluate the mechanisms that govern these particles' generation, the effect of offset on their formation, and proposing the material flow behavior, using the detached fragments as tracers. It was established that the offset controls the metal's fluidity, which allows the accumulation of steel fragments on the advanced side, and reducing its quantity, due to the decrease of irregularities in the Al-steel interface. Likewise, the metal flow was observed on the retreating side, with that mentioned in aluminum joints. In contrast, on the advanced side, there is a shear action, push down, and lateral movement towards the retreating side, driven by the high forging strength of the metal and the restriction imposed by the steel and the backing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Energy consumption is a notable factor in the design of new transport systems. Therefore, the reduction of vehicle weight, without compromising the integrity of the structure, is the target of many studies [1], with a focus on the automotive, [2, 3], naval [4], aeronautics [5] and aerospace [6, 7] industries. In this sense, different methodologies have emerged and continue to be evaluated. One of these is the Friction Stir Welding (FSW) process, developed by TWI in 1991 [8], which is a technique for joining and processing materials that arose from the concept of conventional friction welding. FSW uses a tool to produce heat while generating severe plastic deformation, resulting in a mechanical/metallurgical mixture of the plasticized

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NOMENCLATURE

FSW Friction stir welding
IMC Intermetallic compounds
O R Real offset (mm)
O F Tangent offset (mm)
P T Tool penetration (mm)
OM Optical microscopy
SZ Stir zone
TMAZ Thermo-mechanically affected zone
F T Travel force (N)

F R Rotational force (N)
P E Effective depth
R S Retreating side
AS Advancing side

Greek Symbols

ω Rotation speed (rpm)
υ Welding speed (mm/min)
δ slip/stick factor (mm/rev)
λ spacing between bands (mm)

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metal [9], [10]. The tool, formed by a pin and a shoulder, has two main functions: locally heat the workpiece and stir the material to obtain the welded joint. The combined movement of rotation and translation in the tool generates relative displacement due to different speeds in both sides of the tool, allowing a complex flow of metal in the plasticized zone and, consequently, consolidating a welded joint [11, 12].

Plasticized metal is limited by the tool, solid metal, and backing plate, which forces it to flow around the tool, forming the joint [13]. The flow complexity is accentuated by the tool's geometric features, such as threads and flutes, designed to drive the material and to promote adequate material mixing [14, 15]. Due to the complexity of the metal flow, different types of defects can be found, which include surface defects, voids, and lack-of-fill. The latter two are the result of low plasticity of the material and loss of filling capacity. In this sense, it was determined that the pitch (v/o) is an essential variable for controlling voids and kissing bonds [16].

The welding of dissimilar joints [17, 18] was approached considering three different systems: i) dissimilar joints of low melting metals, ii) the joining of hard metals, and iii) the joining of metals with different mechanical properties. The welding of systems composed of metals with very different physical properties has limitations due to the multiple challenges. The main ones are the difference in the melting temperature and mechanical strength. The FSW of dissimilar metals is different from the welding of the same metal systems by forming a more heterogeneous flow of metal [19]. Also, few references to the metal flow in the FSW of Al-steel joints make it difficult to understand and control the generation of defects.

The first experiments with welding dissimilar joints using FSW ended with developing new welding parameters, based on the flow of the plasticized material and the asymmetry of heat generation in the joint [20], which are the joint configuration and the position of the tool. The joint configuration determines how the plates should be positioned considering the advancing and retreating sides. The joint configuration for welding metals with different melting temperatures places the hardest metal on the advanced region, which is the side where the temperature generated by friction is higher [21]. The parameter that determines the position of the tool is called offset. Therefore, the offset defines the position of the tangent of the pin to the joint line, being positive when it enters steel and negative when the pin is entirely in aluminum [22, 23]. From these recommendations, Yasui [24] obtained welded joints AA6063-steel, where he related the effect of u and o with the plastic flow and the formation of defects, similar to what happened when welding joints of the same metal.

In addition to the complex flow of metal, the detachment of steel is usual in this type of welded joint. The majority of papers on the subject mention such fragments without going into greater detail [25]. Several works point to the formation of intermetallic compounds (IMC) around steel particles [26], while others evaluate their effect on the response to corrosion of the joint [27], being that the increment in the number of fragments significantly increases the corrosion rate [23-28]. It should be noted that different strategies have been presented to investigate the flow of material during FSW, such as insertion of markers, three-dimensional analysis using X-ray tomography or X-ray radiography in situ, use of different materials, the use of plasticine, and applied freezing after the pin breaks [29]. In one of the first works, Colligan [30] used steel markers to determine the material flow in aluminum joints. Consequently, the steel fragments detached during the FSW of Al-steel joints can be used as markers to follow the plasticized metal flow in the nugget zone.

Therefore, it is essential to understand the effect of welding parameters on the mechanisms that produce these particles and the strategies to control their formation. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand the plasticized metal flow since the detached particles' position and characteristics depend on it. This manuscript assesses the effect of offset on the formation, size, and distribution of the steel particles detached and deposited in the mixing zone. The paper also presents a proposal about the offset's influence in the aluminum plasticization process and the metal's flow in thin aluminum-steel joints welded by FSW. The authors would like to highlight the major concern about joining aluminum and steel are the variety of deleterious intermetallic compounds in the fusion zone, in case of fusion welding processes and the nugget zone when friction stir welding is used. The ability to achieve the pursued challenge, which is Al-steel joining, is connected to a better understanding and controlling the nugget zone precipitation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials used were aluminum alloy plates 6063-T5 and AISI SAE 1020 steel, both with dimensions of 500 × 85 × 2.0 mm. Welding was performed using a dedicated FSW machine from Transformation Technologies Incorporated (TTI), model RM-2. The machine has complete control of the welding parameters (rotation and welding speed), even with penetration of the tool controlled by position or axial load. In addition, the device has torque, liquid cooled tool holder, and wireless temperature acquisition system required for continuous real time temperature data control. A metal matrix and ceramic reinforcement tool of tungsten carbide (WC-14Co) were used, with shoulder and pin of 25 and 5.7 mm in diameter, respectively, and a pin length of 1.35 mm.
Figure 1a shows the configuration of the joint. The positioning of tool was done using two criteria: the tangent offset (O_T) and the tool real offset (O_R). The first considers the distance between the pin and the joint line’s tangent, while the second holds the radius of the pin (5.7 mm) plus the displacement of the tangent (Figure 1b).

The joints were produced using ceramic backing [31]; however, to demonstrate the complete material flow, joints were made using a 5052-aluminum backing. Table 1 displays the variables and parameters used in the welding process. The joints were elaborated using the tool position control mode, with the axial force of 18 kN, to +0.5 mm offset, and 22 kN for +1.0 and +1.5 mm.

Microstructural characterization was performed using optical microscopy (OM) and scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM). The samples were prepared using sandpaper from 100 to 1500 mesh, followed by polishing with 1.0 µm diamond paste. In order to observe the microstructure, the samples were etched with 2% nital, followed by etching with 1% hydrofluoric acid. The characterization of the steel particles was performed using the ImageJ software.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Base Metal

Figure 2 presents the microstructure of the metals used. For both the AISI-SAE 1020 and the AA6063 the structure is composed of equiaxial grains in all directions. In the steel workpiece (Figure 2a), the structure is formed by ferrite grains with perlite (white). For the aluminum alloy (Figure 2b), the arrangement is of $\gamma_{Al}$ grains, with the presence of $\beta_{AlFeSi}$ particles, many of them dissolved (holes) by the action of the etchant [32]. In both cases, there is no evidence of the metal rolling process.

3.2. Macrostructure, Production, and Control of Steel Particles

Figure 3 shows the macrographs of the welded joints with $O_T$ of +0.5 and +1.5. Two regions are easily identified on the aluminum side: nugget or stir zone (SZ), and the thermo-mechanically affected zone (TMAZ), while on the steel side, only TMAZ is evident. The welding parameters and the heat input control were essential in obtaining joints with a suitable surface appearance with no defects [33].

A similar structure, with a clear difference between the welded metals, was observed in dissimilar joints of AA7075-AA2024. The authors claim that low rotational speed negatively affects the joint, leading to absence of mixing. In contrast, satisfactory mixture is reached at high rotational speed. [34, 35]. It is not the case for aluminum-steel joints, where mixing does not occur in any condition, as highlighted by other authors [36, 37], who points out a clear limit between aluminum and steel. The only mixing occurs in the SZ, where steel fragments are observed, typical of this type of welded joint [38], [39].

The general appearance of the particles can be seen in Figure 4a. It would be plausible to believe that particles could come from the tool, but that possibility is completely ruled out. The fragments retain traces of the TMAZ, from where they were detached. For example, the cementite sheets are completely stretched by the high deformation of steel at the interface, in addition to the ferrite micro-grains formed by the dynamic recrystallization of the steel (Figure 4b). It also highlights the absence of intermetallic compounds (IMC) due to the absence of these deleterious phases in the welded joints, as it was indicated in previous work [40]. The absence of IMC contrasts those with other studies [41, 42], where these composites outline the particles, identified by Pourali et al. [43] as FeAl.

Lee et al. [44] attribute the formation of debris to the $O_T$’s action, which leads to broken steel particles on the
surface of welded joints being distributed within the SZ. Figure 5 shows images from top to bottom in joints with +0.5 and +1.5 mm offset. These images confirm the accumulation of the fragments, mainly on the surface, so it is defined that this is the most important place for its quantification.

The hypothesis that the quantity and size of the particles change with the $O_T$ is being corroborated in Figure 6. Surprisingly, there is a constant reduction in the number of particles as the offset increases; the expected behavior was the opposite. Higher $O_T$ means more interaction between tool and steel, which would easily explain the increased particle formation [45].

On the other hand, related to the steel particles size, Figure 6 does not show a discernible relationship with the offset, since it was expected that a higher $O_T$ would generate large steel debris [46]. Figure 7 shows a more precise relation between offset and particle size by the distribution of the particle area. It confirms the reduction in the number of particles with $O_T$; besides, the figure registers that the particle size is less than 0.1 mm$^2$, for all conditions evaluated. Finally, the analysis leaves in mind that the particle size decreases with $O_T$, evidenced by the smaller number of particles larger than 1.0 mm$^2$, which confirms the reduction of both quantity and size with the offset.

Part of the formation and the detachment of the fragments are related to the generation of protuberances (Figure 8a). The tool shear stress promoted by plasticized aluminum entrance in small openings in the Al-steel
interface (Figure 8b). Coelho et al. [47] observed the formation of similar structures that they defined as a non-smooth interface, to which the mechanical interlocking between both materials is attributed. Movahedi et al. [48] indicate that aluminum’s entry favors IMC formation in a swirl-layer, formed by the mechanical mixture and the diffusion between aluminum and steel. However, this is not the case for the joints under study, as the phase in the openings corresponds completely to Al (Figure 8c).

In the flatter regions of the interface, the detachment mechanism is different, as it involves tearing the interface, as shown in Figure 9a, which leads to the removal of irregularities. The deformation at the interface is so high that it causes stretching and recrystallization of the ferrite grains; features are observed outside the steel fragments, as shown in Figure 9b.

Figure 7. Measurement of the quantity and area of the steel fragments at the top of the SZ.

Figure 8. FE-SEM images of the final joint welded with a +1.5 mm offset. a) Formation of protuberances at the interface, b) ingress of aluminum into the steel, and c) cracking and separation of the protuberance.

Figure 9. FE-SEM images of a) steel particle coming off the Al-steel interface and b) detail of the particle interface showing the severe deformation of the ferrite grains.

3. 3. Metal Flow

Figure 3 exposes the flow of material in the thin sheet Al-steel joint. Metal flow was described, considering morphological features observed in the macrographs such as banding, steel’s profile at the interface, the shape of the SZ, and the steel fragments location. Kimapong and Watanabe [49] indicate that the particles aligned with the aluminum flow, as observed in Figure 10, follow the plasticized metal movement.

Banding is one of the most prominent peculiarities in the SZ of metals processed by FSW. In this process, the plasticized metal displacement occurs both in a laminar and vertical way. As the tool advances, plasticized metal is added layer-by-layer to the joint’s back, which generates the banding, better known as the onion ring structure [50]. For the joints in question, this is more noticeable in regions with a considerable accumulation of...
steel fragments. Fonda and Bingert [51] established that these bands correspond to structural variations such as grain size, particle distribution, or texture, while multiple authors [52-55] report that the spacing between bands (λ) corresponds to the advance per reVolution (υ/ω).

Another critical point is the position of the particles. As presented in Figure 10, as the OT increases, the steel fragments accumulate on the advanced side. This phenomenon can be justified considering the scheme of Figure 11a. Chen et al. [56] explain that the so-called shear zone occurs at the front of the pin, gradually growing as it moves towards the RS. The material transferred from the AS is moved towards the pin’s back, generating a layer, which forms the banding. The highly deformed material flows around the pin forming the swirl zones. It is responsible for forming of defects such as voids when the plasticized metal’s speed is lower to reach the metal at the rear of the advanced side [57]. Kumar and Kailas [58] point out that void defects are eliminated as welding forces increase, as the metal’s extrusion force increases. However, other authors indicate that voids presence is the result of the lack of adherence between the plasticized metal and the pin [59, 60]. Kumar and Kailas [61] showed that for small OT, much of the entrained material is deposited at the rear of the advanced side, which explains the position of the steel particles.

In a joint of the same material, the interaction between the tool and the pieces generates different forces represented in Figure 11b. Two types of forces can be highlighted: the normal force (Fn), generated by the forward movement of the tool, and the shear force (Fs) produced by the friction between the pin and the metal, where their direction and magnitude vary with the tool’s position. Coelho et al. [62] agree with this approach but explain that they are two fundamental forces: the advanced force (Ftravel) and the rotational force (Frotation). Such forces are added or subtracted at some point, generating Fs and Frot; thus, the forces magnitude depends on the welding parameters and the welded metal’s mechanical and physical properties.

Therefore, the shear force on the feed side (Fs(adv)) is the sum of Ftravel and Frotation, which generates a region of high forging pressure, accentuated by the constriction of the shoulder and the steel. This force is high enough to promote the steel's significant deformation and generate its recrystallization at the interface (Figure 9). When the force is very high, this leads to the stirring pin into the steel surface, producing the so-called fin-like shaper [63] observed in the rectangle in Figure 10c. This pressure on the advanced side pushes the steel down. However, the ceramic backing reacts against this movement, forcing the metal to move horizontally, below the pin, towards the aluminum side (Figure 3).

The deformation of the steel is different in the case of an aluminum backing. Figure 12 presents the welded joints results with the backing of AA5052, which shows the metal’s full flow, without the restriction imposed by a higher hardness backing. This figure reveals how the steel moves and goes beyond the pin from the advanced to the retreating side. The effective depth (PE) increases with the offset in joints welded with the same tool penetration (PT). The flow of metal pushes the steel to the bottom from the AS, subsequently carried upwards when it reaches the RS. In this case, the upward movement of material is caused by the advanced side’s metal flow.
The upward movement of the steel on the RS (Figure 12) is the same that pushes the aluminum upward, on the same side at Al-steels joints (Figure 3). On this side, $F_s$ is lower, since the advanced movement of the tool is opposite to the rotation, generating a low-pressure area, which favors the flow from the bottom to the surface.

4. DISCUSSION

The welding zone’s morphological features are inherent to metal's flow, both in solid and plasticized state. One of the models in FSW considers the material flow as the sum of three combined movements: 1) a cylindrical flow around the pin, 2) a homogeneous flow parallels to the welding direction, and 3) an upward vortex-shaped flow around the pin [64]. Fonda et al. [65] explain that the flow around the pin is produced by the tool’s rotation, which results in the shear deformation that originates from the shear zone. Likewise, they point out that the downward and upward movement of metal (vortex) is due to the threads and the tool's translation, generating the "onion ring". The spacing between bands corresponds to the tool advance per reVolution. Gerlich et al. [66] e Avettand-Fenoël et al. [67] also consider that the SZ was made up of only two flows: 1) the flow generated by the pin and 2) that produced by the axial force and rotation of the shoulder [50]. However, these theories are devised for the flow of metal in joints of the same metal. A few works make proposals for dissimilar joints between a soft metal and another of high resistance. Nevertheless, these elements must be considered to explain the observed behavior about the shape, distribution of steel particles in the SZ, and propose a model for FSW in thin Al-steels joints.

During the initial contact of the tool with the joint, the steel particles detachment occurs due to the shoulder's erosive action. The high pressure and the displacement of the plasticized aluminum cause the deformation of the wedge-shaped steel (Figure 3b). Texier et al. [68] point out that the intensity or speed at which extrusion occurs depends on the material's relative position to the pin. Doude et al. [69] studied the combined effect of shoulder and pin movements, added to the restriction imposed by backing, on the generation of symmetric vortex flow in the SZ (Figure 13a). However, in Al-steels joints, the symmetry is broken. The steel acts as another barrier to metal flow, altering the distribution of the plasticized material, allowing only its downward movement into the AS. In turn, this pushes the steel towards the bottom, to the pin's tip, and forces the steel to move horizontally in the direction of the RS (Figure 13b). The degree of deformation of the steel is subject to offset since this factor controls magnitude of the forging force. Wan and Huang [70] came to a similar result, where the forging force increased by the tool plunge.

On the other hand, the steel particles detachment was produced by the interaction between the shoulder and the pushing force of plasticized metal removing irregularities from the steel surface, leaving it smoother. The shear movement generated by the pin promotes the emergence of irregularities and openings in the interface. However, as the offset increases, the forging pressure between the pin-shoulder and the steel is high enough to flatten the surface, reducing the number of irregularities and the detached particles mass. For this, the forging pressure close to the possible openings in the Al-steel interface, preventing the entrance of the plasticized metal. Smaller fragments come off since the irregularities are also smaller.

Most of the particles were formed by the contact between the shoulder and the joint surface. Few particles are dragged downwards, as shown by the series of images in Figure 5. Particles displaced by shoulder remain in their influences the area, while those caused inside the SZ are displaced to the surface by vortex movement. From this, it is essential to establish a link between the offset and the particles' position.

Liechty and Webb [71] determined flow lines in FSW, the result of which is superimposed on the macrographs of the deposits, as presented in Figure 14. A fraction of the pin interacts with the steel with a small offset, but such coincides with the flow that rotates more than 180° around the pin, allowing the fragments to pass from the AS to the RS and continue to the rear of the pin (Figure 14a). As $\Omega_T$ increases, many of the AS flow lines move parallel to the weld axis so that the detached particles are not trapped by the pin flow, crossing by the same AS (Figure 14b-c).

In another proposal for metal flow, Zeng et al. [72] relate the displacement of the plasticized metal with the
joint’s temperature since it defines the degree of fluidity of the metal. Figures 14a-c shows Zeng’s results superimposed with the particle distribution to +0.5, and +1.5 mm offset. For this type of joints, it was determined that both heat input and maximum temperature increase with the offset [73, 74], and in that sense, there is an agreement with Zang’s proposal and the observed results.

In FSW, heat is the main product of friction between the shoulder and the joint [75], the shear deformation produced by the pin [76]. Therefore, the heat generation depends on contact conditions of the elements since the metal can stick or slide on the tool [77]. Idagawa et al. [78] relate the slip/stick conditions with the offset and the heat generation in these joints, through the slip/stick factor ($\delta$) for each material ($\delta_{\text{Al}}$ and $\delta_{\text{Steel}}$). If $\delta = 1$, there is virtually no adherence between metal and tool, so the heat is generated mainly by friction.

On the other hand, if $\delta = 0$, the heat is produced almost entirely by plastic deformation [79]. [Souza et al. DOI: 10.3217/978-3-85125-615-4-33]. Idagawa was able to establish that, on the aluminum side, the predominant mechanism for heat generation is plastic deformation, which implies that plasticized metal adheres to the tool, while for steel, the friction responds for 85% of the heat produced, consequently prevail slip on the steel-tool interaction. Even more important was to establish that $\delta_{\text{Al}}$ increases significantly with the offset, going from 0.02 to 0.40, meaning that adhesion is lost between the elements because the plasticized metal reaches significant fluidity. Therefore, this sings that the detached particles' location is related to the metal’s fluidity, which depends on the joint's temperature, which in the case in question is subject to offset.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This work evaluated the generation and distribution of steel fragments and the metal flow in thin sheets of aluminum-steel welded joints. From the results and their analysis, the following points are concluded.

The detachment of steel particles was produced by two mechanisms: generation of protuberances at the interface by introducing plasticized aluminum and the tearing of the surface by the shear stress of the aluminum flow.

Detached particles correspond only to steel since they have cementite sheets and ultra-fine grains of ferrite, generated by the steel’s high deformation and dynamic recrystallization.

The quantity of fragments decreases with the offset due to the reduction in protuberances formation by increasing the forging force, which inhibits plasticized aluminum entrance at the interface.

Forging force at AS increases with the offset, which implies that the steel’s surface moves down and below the pin, where the restriction of the backing forces its horizontal displacement towards the RS.

The particles position is defined by the offset, which controls the plasticized fluidity of metals by determining the temperature in the joint. Large offset generates higher temperature and metal fluidity, allowing that particles to be dragged to the pin’s back, closer to AS’s interface. Meanwhile, a small offset decreases the temperature and fluidity of aluminums, promoting that the fragments are led to the pin’s back, closer to the centerline.

The containment between the shoulder, pin, and backing, on the retreating side, promote the material to flow in a vortex shape. In contrast, on the advancing side,
the flow’s symmetry is broken by the restriction imposed by the steel, which promotes shear and downward movement of the plasticized metal.

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