

Cavitation

The word cavitation refers to the formation of vapor bubbles in regions of low pressure within the flow field of a liquid. In some respects, cavitation is similar to boiling, except that the latter is generally considered to occur as a result of an increase of temperature rather than a decrease of pressure. This difference in the direction of the state change in the phase diagram is more significant than might, at first sight, be imagined. It is virtually impossible to cause any rapid uniform change in temperature throughout a finite volume of liquid. Rather, temperature change most often occurs by heat transfer through a solid boundary. Hence, the details of the boiling process generally embrace the detailed interaction of vapor bubbles with a solid surface, and the thermal boundary layer on that surface. On the other hand, a rapid, uniform change in pressure in a liquid is commonplace and, therefore, the details of the cavitation process may differ considerably from those that occur in boiling. Much more detail on the process of cavitation is included in later sections.

It is sufficient at this juncture to observe that cavitation is generally a malevolent process, and that the deleterious consequences can be divided into three categories. First, cavitation can cause damage to the material surfaces close to the area where the bubbles collapse when they are convected into regions of higher pressure. Cavitation damage can be very expensive, and very difficult to eliminate. For most designers of hydraulic machinery, it is the preeminent problem associated with cavitation. Frequently, one begins with the objective of eliminating cavitation completely. However, there are many circumstances in which this proves to be impossible, and the effort must be redirected into minimizing the adverse consequences of the phenomenon.

The second adverse effect of cavitation is that the performance of the pump, or other hydraulic device, may be significantly degraded. In the case of pumps, there is generally a level of inlet pressure at which the performance will decline dramatically, a phenomenon termed cavitation breakdown. This adverse effect has naturally given rise to changes in the design of a pump so as to minimize the degradation of the performance; or, to put it another way, to optimize the performance in the presence of cavitation. One such design modification is the addition of a cavitating inducer upstream of the inlet to a centrifugal or mixed flow pump impeller. Another example is manifest in the blade profiles used for supercavitating propellers. These supercavitating hydrofoil sections have a sharp leading edge, and are shaped like curved wedges with a thick, blunt trailing edge.

The third adverse effect of cavitation is less well known, and is a consequence of the fact that cavitation affects not only the steady state fluid flow, but also the unsteady or dynamic response of the flow. This change in the dynamic performance leads to instabilities in the flow that do not occur in the absence of cavitation. Examples of these instabilities are “rotating cavitation”, which is somewhat similar to the phenomenon of rotating stall in a compressor, and “auto-oscillation,” which is somewhat similar to compressor surge. These instabilities can give rise to oscillating flow rates and pressures that can threaten the structural integrity of the pump or its inlet or discharge ducts. While a complete classification of the various types of unsteady flow arising from cavitation has yet to be constructed, we can, nevertheless, identify a number of specific types of instability, and these are reviewed in later sections.