International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(Review Article)

The integration of pressure sensors in the field of robotics

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 14(03), 030-035

Publication history: Received on 26 January 2025; revised on 01 March 2025; accepted on 03 March 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.14.3.0606

Abstract

Pressure sensors are in modern robotics very significant because they enable force measurement, tactile sensing, and human-machine interaction. This work introduces the basic principles, various classifications, and applications of pressure sensors in robotic systems. The present work discusses different sensing technologies, working mechanisms, advantages, and limitations, as well as a sketch on current challenges, such as sensor robustness, sensitivity, and the integration of AI-driven processing. Emerging trends like electronic skin (E-skin), multi-modal sensor fusion, and self-healing materials form potential improvements facing the future of robotic sensing. An appraisal of the landscape and some future trends broadens knowledge regarding the niche future role of pressure sensors within next-generation robotics.

Keywords: Pressure sensing; Sensors; Robotics; Humanoids

1. Introduction

Pressure sensing refers to detecting and analysing the force exerted by matter (solid, liquid, or gas) on a surface. In robotics, we use this method to detect the pressure that is being applied to the surface of a robot's body. This is done through pressure sensors. They are devices that convert physical force into electrical signals that the robot's control system can read. Therefore, there's no doubt that pressure sensors play an important role in robotics.

Object grasping is the fundamental capability of robotics, allowing robots to pick up, hold, and manipulate objects. Its main components include end effectors, control algorithms, and sensors, most importantly pressure sensors. Pressure sensors play an important role in object grasping by providing real-time feedback on the force applied during gripping. These sensors help robots achieve stable, adaptive, and precise grasps without damaging objects or losing grip.

The field of robotics has been continuously expanding since its beginning, from only being used in big production lines and research centers to being used in (complex human environments) in our day-to-day lives. Of course, fitting into humane environments includes adopting human-like characteristics. That is where one of the key factors, dextrous manipulation comes in handy. Dexterous manipulation is an area of robotics in which multiple manipulators, or fingers, cooperate to grasp and manipulate objects. In this method, the problem is object-centered; i.e., it is based on how the object should behave and what forces should be exerted upon it. This is the point where a traditional robot gripper loses its efficiency. Dextrous manipulation requires precise control of forces and motions. [An Overview of Dexterous Manipulation Allison M. Okamura, Niels Smaby and Mark R. Cutkosky]. Pressure sensors detect these applied forces and provide real-time feedback. This feedback helps adjust the forces as necessary so as not to damage the object and enhance overall control. In robotics and prosthetics, dexterous manipulation combined with pressure sensors enables more human-like interactions with objects, improving functionality in automation, healthcare, and industrial applications.

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This shows that pressure sensing is an indispensable part of modern-day robotics. Therefore, it is important to understand its principles, its types, its functions, and what improvements could be made in this field. This paper aims to highlight the technologies used in pressure detection and their application. It also sheds light on the advancements in the field and challenges associated with pressure sensing.

1.1. Background

Pressure is defined as the force applied perpendicularly over a unit area. Therefore, naturally, pressure sensing involves detecting the force applied over a particular surface area. Pressure sensors work by detecting force and transforming it into an electrical signal that can be processed and interpreted. This attained data is used to adjust the applied force as necessary.

Let's delve into the key principles of pressure sensing. There are different types of pressure and each of their measurement serves different purposes in the field of robotics.

- Absolute pressure: this is measured relative to a perfect vacuum. We use this measurement of pressure when we are using end effectors such as vacuum grippers to ensure that the proper suction is applied to the object to be picked up or manipulated. This is also used in aerospace robotics to measure altitude and atmospheric pressure for drones and space applications.
- Gauge pressure: this measurement is taken relative to the atmospheric pressure. This measurement helps regulate fluid pressure in robotic actuators and ensures stability in mobile robots.
- Differential pressure: this is determined between two different pressure points. It is mainly used to regulate the airflow in the field of soft robotics. As it is highly useful in detecting airflow changes it is used for navigation in drones and underwater robots.
- Dynamic pressure: it measures pressure variations over time, especially in a moving system. It is used in collision detection and robotic safety mechanisms.

Different technologies are used to measure pressure based on the application's requirements.

Pressure is sensed by mechanical elements such as plates, shells, and tubes that are designed and constructed to deflect when pressure is applied. Deflection of the elements must be transduced to obtain an electrical or other output.[Almassri, A. M., Wan Hasan, W. Z., Ahmad, S. A., Ishak, A. J., Ghazali, A. M., Talib, D. N., & Wada, C. (2014). Pressure Sensor: State of the Art, Design, and Application for Robotic Hand. Journal of Sensors, 2015(1), 846487. https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/846487]

2. Types of pressure sensors in robotics

Pressure sensors can differ in technology, design, performance, application suitability, and cost. It can be classified based on various transduction principles.[Almassri, A. M., Wan Hasan, W. Z., Ahmad, S. A., Ishak, A. J., Ghazali, A. M., Talib, D. N., & Wada, C. (2014). Pressure Sensor: State of the Art, Design, and Application for Robotic Hand. Journal of Sensors, 2015(1), 846487. https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/846487]. These classifications include the following.

2.1. Piezoresistive pressure sensors

It measures pressure-induced changes in electrical resistance using a strain gauge. A strain gauge is a device used to measure the strain on an object. They are small patches of silicone or metal that measure mechanical strain and convert the load acting on an object into electrical signals.

Using piezoresistive sensors has many advantages including high sensitivity, wide pressure range, fast response time, and many more. It is also small in size which allows their integration into devices with space constraints. Additionally, these sensors consume less power making them energy efficient.

However, there are some drawbacks associated with them. One of them is temperature sensitivity. Since the gauge itself is made out of a thin string of metal, its resistance can change with variations in temperature causing an error in pressure measurement. In the same manner, humidity can also affect the sensor's materials and electrical properties. Some piezoresistive sensors require calibration due to their non-linear behaviour. Over time, these sensors exhibit drift or hysteresis, impacting long-term stability.

This technology is usually used in robotic grippers to improve object manipulation. It is also used in the making of prosthetic limbs to offer precise control for amputated patients who are using them.

2.2. Capacitive pressure sensors

These sensors mainly consist of two parallel plates out of which one is a flexible diaphragm that moves when pressure is applied. When pressure is applied, there is a change in the distance between the electrodes or the electrode area causing a change in the capacitance. This change in capacitance can be measured which will help us find the pressure applied.

They have many advantages compared to piezoresistive resistors such as good linearity, low-temperature sensitivity, and minimal hysteresis drift.

They can be designed to work in extreme environments. The main advantage of this sensor is that some of its designs allow non-contact pressure sensing, thereby, reducing wear and tear significantly.

Capacitive pressure sensors also have many drawbacks. They are susceptible to parasitic effects such as electromagnetic interference (EMI) and stray capacitance which can affect the accuracy of these sensors. They are also highly fragile due to their thin membranes. Moreover, compared to piezoresistive sensors they are more expensive.

Capacitive pressure sensors are usually used in soft robotic skins for touch sensitivity, wearable robotics, and assistive devices.

2.3. Optical pressure sensors

An optical pressure sensor uses light-based technology to measure the changes in pressure. Application of pressure results in variations in the properties of light (such as intensity, wavelength, phase, or interference).

The working of optical sensors depends on the type of optical sensor in question. There are three main types of optical pressure sensors. They are

- Fiber Bragg Grating (FBB) sensors: it uses a fiber optic cable with periodic variations in refractive index which creates a grating that only reflects light of a specific wavelength. When pressure is applied there is a change in the grating constant which causes a shift in the reflected wavelength. This shift can be measured and correlated with the pressure applied.

- Fabry Perot Interferometers: they use an optical cavity whose cavity length changes with the application of pressure. This change in length is measured and is used to find the pressure applied.

- Intensity-based optical sensors: use the principle of change in light transmission or reflection caused due to pressure application.

Optical pressure sensors have a lot of advantages including heightened sensitivity, non-conductivity, and immunity to electromagnetic interference. They can also be miniaturised enabling them to be integrated into compact fiber optic systems.

The downside is that these sensors require complex signal processing and have many challenges in installation. They are also much more expensive compared to piezoresistive or capacitive sensors.

2.4. MEMS (Microelectromechanical systems) pressure sensors

MEMS (micro-electromechanical systems) is the technology of microscopic devices incorporating both electronic and moving parts. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MEMS]. Their miniaturised mechanical components can deform under pressure and alter their electrical properties. These alterations can be measured and can help us find the pressure applied. This MEMS technology can be applied to any of the above-mentioned pressure sensing methods making it highly flexible in terms of use.

MEMS pressure sensors have the main advantage of their compact size allowing them to be integrated into many devices without using up much space. They are low-power consuming devices making them energy efficient. They are also cost-effective making them capable of mass production.

MEMS sensors are very fragile and temperature sensitive which can result in errored measurement. They also require complex fabrication which restrains them from being used in heavy-duty applications. It is mostly used in smartphones, automobiles, medical devices, and wearables.

2.5. Applications of pressure sensing in robots and humanoids

The integration of pressure sensors in humanoids and robots has transformed their capability to sense and interact with their surroundings, facilitating accurate force control, increased dexterity, and safer human-robot interactions. Their role is often times underappreciated but crucial in industrial automation to assistive humanoid robots. The major applications of pressure sensors can be classified into three:

- Proprioceptive sensing: using pressure measurements inside joints to determine the applied torque and forces. [Pressure Sensor in Robotics| Adaptive Robotic Solutions. superiorsensors.com]. The pressure sensors which are embedded between the robotic joints, actuators or hydraulic pneumatic systems provide non-stop monitoring of the forces and internal pressures. These pressure sensors help to dynamically adjust the gripping strength in industrial robots and help biped or humanoid robots to balance on uneven terrain.

- Artificial tactile sensing: Tactile sensing is the technology that mimics or is modeled after the human sense of physical touch. Pressure sensors help robots and humanoids to develop an artificial sense of touch, making them more similar in behaviour to humans. These help in comprising what is known as an "Electronic skin" or E-skin. The pressure sensors play a vital role in dextrous manipulation to adjust grip strength so as to not damage the object being manipulated. They are also used in surface texture recognition - an advanced form of tactile sensing allowing them to differentiate between different textures of materials (soft, rough, smooth, etc.) to better interact with the diverse environment in which they are. A pressure-sensitive exterior will also help robots in detecting oncoming collisions thereby preventing damage to both the robot and its surroundings.

- Safety and human-robot interaction: As robots are being integrated into our lives at a faster pace than ever, it is important that safety becomes a top priority. Pressure sensor-equipped robots can control the force that they apply guaranteeing safe physical interactions in the field of service and healthcare. Humanoids with pressure-sensitive artificial skin will be able to interpret human touch enabling them to be more interactive with their human-centered environments.

The scope of the integration of pressure sensors into robotics is much larger than these three main domains. Their integration helps to pave the way for more adaptive and intelligent robotic systems.

3. Challenges and limitations

Although the addition of pressure sensors has significantly improved the field of robotics many drawbacks and challenges persist. These mainly consist of issues related to their durability, sensitivity, power consumption, data processing, and overall cost.

- Durability and sensitivity of pressure sensors: There is a significant compromise between durability and sensitivity in robotics. Sensors like the ones mentioned earlier in this paper require high sensitivity while also being able to function without much damage to themselves in harsh environments. [A. Smith et al., "Advancements in Piezoresistive Pressure Sensors for Robotics," IEEE Transactions on Sensors and Actuators, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 1234-1248, 2023.] Flexible pressure sensors which are usually used to cover robotic surfaces tend to undergo wear and tear pretty quickly due to repeated interactions. This tends to reduce its performance over a span of time. Whereas highly sensitive sensors that can detect even very minute forces tend to be fragile, which limits their long-term application. [B. Johnson and C. Wang, "Flexible Tactile Sensors for Robotic Applications," Journal of Smart Materials and Structures, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 89-102, 2022.]

- Power consumption and data processing issues: Here lies the second trade-off of pressure sensor integration. Robotic systems that use high-resolution pressure sensor arrays generate huge volumes of data. This data must be processed to provide adaptive feedback. The challenge lies in processing this data without compromising the energy efficiency or system performance. [D. Patel et al., "Computational Challenges in Real-Time Robotic Tactile Processing," Robotics and Autonomous Systems, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 210-225, 2022.]

- Cost of advanced sensor integration: Even though humanoids or interactive robots are becoming more and more popular, the cost of advanced sensors needed for their proper functioning has not been getting cheaper.

The cause for their high prices lies in the complex manufacturing processes that are needed to produce these sensors with enhanced durability and accuracy. [P. Andersson, "Cost Analysis of Pressure Sensor Manufacturing for Robotics," Sensors and Microsystems Journal, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 112-126, 2023.]

Usually, humanoid robots require full-body tactile sensing which is costly and, in turn, causes a rise in the production costs of humanoids. This poses limitations in areas where affordability is crucial such as healthcare.

As research in the field of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and embedded systems evolves, these challenges are likely to be overcome, opening the doors to more intelligent, adaptive, and cost-effective humanoid robots.

4. Future trends and innovations

Future improvements in pressure sensor technology are thought to improve efficiency and durability in their use with robotic devices. The development of flexible and stretchable electronic skin (e-skin) will enable robots to achieve human-like tactile perception, improving their ability to interact with complex environments [J. Liu et al., "E-Skin: The Future of Tactile Perception in Robotics," Advanced Materials, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 567-580, 2023]. Scientists are looking at the possibility of self-healing materials that will allow minor damage repair and lead to increased life spans in applications where pressure sensors endure regular wear [S. Carter et al., "Self-Healing Electronics for Long-Term Robotic Applications," Nature Communications, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 145-157, 2022]. Moreover, AI-driven sensor data processing is becoming an influential asset in interpreting tactile feedback in real-time, fostering increased dexterity and adaptation of robots themselves [Y. Nakamura et al., "Machine Learning Approaches for Tactile Sensor Data Interpretation," IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 45-58, 2023].

Another noteworthy trend is the addition of multi-modal sensor fusion, here, pressure sensing is fused with temperature, vibration, and proximity sensors for a more compound perception system in robots. [R. Park et al., "Sensor Fusion Strategies for Tactile Sensing in Robotics," Journal of Robotics Research, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 189-203, 2023]. Furthermore, energy-efficient and wireless pressure sensors relying on triboelectric and piezoelectric energy harvesting techniques are being engineered to reduce power consumption, thereby providing for seamless robotic work. [L. Sun et al., "Energy-Harvesting Pressure Sensors for Sustainable Robotics," Nano Energy, vol. 50, pp. 234-249, 2023].

Continuous research and technological advancements will ensure that pressure sensors continue to play a prime role in offering enhanced robotic intelligence, safety, and human-like interaction, thus making them an indispensable component of next-generation robots.

5. Conclusion

Pressure sensing is one of the most vital technologies in robotics, especially humanoid robots, for accurate interaction with objects, stable locomotion, and for human-robot interaction safety. This paper purveys the basic principles of pressure sensing, different sensor technologies used in robotics, and their applications. Capacitive, piezoresistive, and optical sensors have attained great progression in spawning various robotic capabilities, thus allowing robots to perform complex jobs with Aptitude and extreme adaptability.

In spite of great developments, some challenges still remain. For example, durability of the sensors, power consumption of the sensors, and also the complexity of processing real-time data. Current research is focused on addressing such limitations with more adaptable, flexible, and AI-integrated pressure sensors. The future work of fusion work should integrate multiple-sensors technologies, extend material lifespan, and improve robotics learning algorithms for better tactile perception optimization.

Many intelligent, reactive, and human-like robots will emerge with the further development of pressure sensing. Robotic vision will pave the way for innovations in industrial and service robotics and will also finance prosthetics, assistive devices, and medical robotics-a possible bridge between technology and human contact.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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