Unsupervised Phase-Based Approach for Incompressible 3D Motion Estimation in Tagged MRI using Deep Learning

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Abstract

Tagged magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has been used for decades to observe and quantify the detailed motion of deforming tissue. Image registration-based algorithms are widely used to find the motion field between two timeframes. However, these methods often struggle with issues such as tag fading, large motion, and difficulty in achieving diffeomorphic incompressible flow fields, and long computation time. This paper presents a novel unsupervised phase-based 3D motion estimation technique on tagged MRI. This method introduces two key innovations. The first one is the use of a sinusoidal transformation on the harmonic phase input, which enables end-to-end training and avoids non-differentiable phase interpolation. Second, we propose a Jacobian determinant-based learning objective to encourage the learning of incompressible (or divergence-free) flow fields for deforming biological tissues. The estimated 3D motion fields are dense, accurate, incompressible, and diffeomorphic at the 3D voxel level. The efficacy of the method is assessed using human tongue data including both healthy controls and patients that have undergone glossectomy. We show that the method outperforms existing approaches, and also exhibited improvements in speed, robustness to tag fading, and large tongue motion.

Keywords: Tagged MRI, incompressible, registration, Jacobian determinant, tongue

1. Introduction

Motion estimation of soft tissues under deformation is a major topic in medical imaging research. Magnetic resonance (MR) tagging (Axel and Dougherty, 1989a,b) has been important in diagnosing and characterizing coronary artery disease (McVeigh et al., 1998; Edvardsen et al., 2006) and has a wide range of applications, including cardiac imaging (Kolipaka et al., 2005; Ibrahim, 2011), speech and swallowing research (Parthasarathy et al., 2007; Xing et al., 2019; Gomez et al., 2020), and brain motion in traumatic injuries (Knutsen et al., 2014). MR tagging magnetizes tissue with a spatially modulated periodic pattern, creating temporary tags in the image that move with the tissue capturing the internal motion information.

However, MR tagging has not been widely used in clinical settings (Budinger et al., 1998) due to the long post-processing time and the problem of tag fading caused by T1 relaxation. The harmonic phase (HARP) method (Osman et al., 1999, 2000; Osman and Prince, 2000) addresses these issues by computing phase images from sinusoidally tagged MR images using bandpass filters in the Fourier domain. Based on the fact that the harmonic phases of material points do not change with motion, HARP tracking uses harmonic phase images as proxies in the image registration framework to avoid the violation of brightness consistency caused by tag fading. However, interpolating phase values during registration can be challenging, as it requires wrapping operations (Xing et al., 2017) during phase

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interpolation. The wrapping operation is not differentiable, making it difficult to leverage in an end-to-end learning framework. An alternative to phase interpolation is global phase unwrapping, but it has been found to be extremely difficult and error-prone (Jenkinson, 2003). In this paper, we propose a sinusoidal transformation for harmonic phases that eliminates the need for phase interpolation or phase unwrapping, while still being resistant to tag fading; and accordingly, we design an unsupervised multi-channel image registration framework for a set of 3D tagged images with different tag orientations.

In this study, we focus on estimating tongue motion. According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 48,000 people in the US are diagnosed with oral or oropharyngeal cancer annually, and 33% of these cases affect the tongue (American Cancer Society, 2016). Understanding the motion differences between healthy subjects and those who have undergone a glossectomy can help inform surgical decisions and assist in speech and swallowing remediation. Compared to extensively-studied cardiac motion, tongue motion has four unique properties that make motion estimation challenging: 1) the tongue moves quickly relative to the temporal resolution of the scan during speech; 2) the motion is aperiodic and highly variable among subjects; 3) the tongue is highly deformable during speech due to its interdigitated muscle architecture (Abd-El-Malek, 1955); and 4) the air gap present in the oral cavity can significantly affect the quality of imaging, causing severe artifacts. To address these issues, we develop an unsupervised deep learning model that utilizes phase information of tagged MR images (MRIs) to estimate the motion field. Our model has shown superior performance on healthy subject data and has also demonstrated good generalization to patients who have had a glossectomy.

Incompressibility is another crucial factor to consider when analyzing biological movements, including tongue motion. For example, research has shown that the volume change of the myocardium during a cardiac cycle is less than 4% (Yin et al., 1996), and the volume change of the tongue during speech and swallowing is even smaller (Gilbert et al., 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to assume that muscle motion is incompressible in order to accurately represent the physical tissue properties (Kier and Smith, 1985). In this paper, we propose a determinant-based learning objective that allows the network to learn to estimate incompressible flow fields. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work that has applied a determinant-based constraint within a deep learning-based image registration framework.

Contributions 1) We propose a sinusoidal transformation for harmonic phases, which is resistant to tag fading and can be easily incorporated into the end-to-end training of modern deep learning-based registration frameworks. 2) We propose a determinant-based objective for learning 3D incompressible flow that better represents the motion of human biological tissue. 3) With the aforementioned two features, we propose a novel unsupervised deep learning-based method to directly estimate 3D dense incompressible motion field on tagged MRI. Our approach is robust to tag fading, large motion, and can generalize well to pathological data.

2. Background & Related Work

Tagging MRI-based 3D motion estimation Tracking 3D motion is more desirable than tracking 2D motion, if not necessary. In the past, traditional 2D MR tagging motion

estimation methods have been extended to 3D (Ryf et al., 2002; Abd-Elmoniem et al., 2007; Spottiswoode et al., 2008). However, these methods require the acquisition of a large number of closely spaced image slices, making them impractical for routine clinical use due to the large amount of time required. Other approaches estimate 3D motion directly from sparse imaging geometries, such as using finite element or finite difference methods (O'Dell et al., 1995), tag line tracking based on 2D images (Denney and Prince, 1995), or spline interpolation (Denney and Prince, 1995; Huang et al., 1999). These methods typically require a 3D tissue segmentation, which can be time-consuming and may require human intervention or automated segmentation algorithms. PVIRA (Xing et al., 2017) proposed to interpolate tag images to form a finer grid for later tracking and utilize HARP magnitude images to eliminate the need for a segmentation model. However, PVIRA uses phase images for registration, requiring phase wrapping during interpolation, which can be error-prone and is non-differentiable. In contrast, we propose a novel sinusoidal transformation on 3D harmonic phase images, allowing for intensity-based interpolation techniques, such as linear interpolation. By incorporating this transformation into a learning-based registration framework, we can achieve end-to-end training and improved accuracy. More recently, (Ye et al., 2021) proposed a deep learning-based registration method for tracking cardiac tagged images. However, it only tackles 2D motion and does not account for tag-fading or the incompressibility of the tissue during heartbeats. In contrast, our approach is based on phase information and can directly estimate a dense 3D incompressible motion field.

Deep learning-based image registration Iterative optimization approaches (Avants et al., 2011; Vercauteren et al., 2009; Mansi et al., 2011) have been successful in achieving good accuracy in intensity-based deformable image registration. However, these methods can be slow and require manual tuning for each new image pair. Alternatively, deep learning-based approaches can directly take a pair of moving and fixed images as input and output the corresponding estimated deformations, resulting in faster inference speeds and comparable accuracy to iterative methods (Balakrishnan et al., 2018, 2019; Mok and Chung, 2020; Qiu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Jia et al., 2022). Such registration frameworks learn the function $g_\theta(F, M) = \boldsymbol{\phi}$ which gives the transformation $\boldsymbol{\phi}$ that is used to align the fixed F and moving image M. The function g is parametrized by learnable parameters θ. The parameters are learned by optimizing the generalized objective:

$$\hat{\theta} = \arg\min_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{\text{sim}}(F, M \circ g_\theta(F, M)) + \lambda \mathcal{L}_{\text{smooth}}(g_\theta(F, M)) \,. \tag{1}$$

The first term, $\mathcal{L}_{\text{sim}}$, encourages image similarity between the fixed and warped moving image. The second term, $\mathcal{L}_{\text{smooth}}$, imposes a smoothness constraint on the transformation. The parameter λ determines the trade-off between these two terms. However, these approaches are limited by their reliance on only two scalar images—one fixed and one moving—as input. In contrast, our method allows for the input of three pairs of tagged images with different tag orientations, referred to as multi-channel registration. Additionally, these approaches are unable to preserve the incompressibility of the motion field, whereas our approach estimates an incompressible flow field whose quality is comparable to the iterative methods (Mansi et al., 2011; Xing et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2023), while being much faster.

Incompressiblity Incompressible flow fields, also known as divergence-free vector fields or volume-preserving transformations, have been a longstanding research topic in fluid

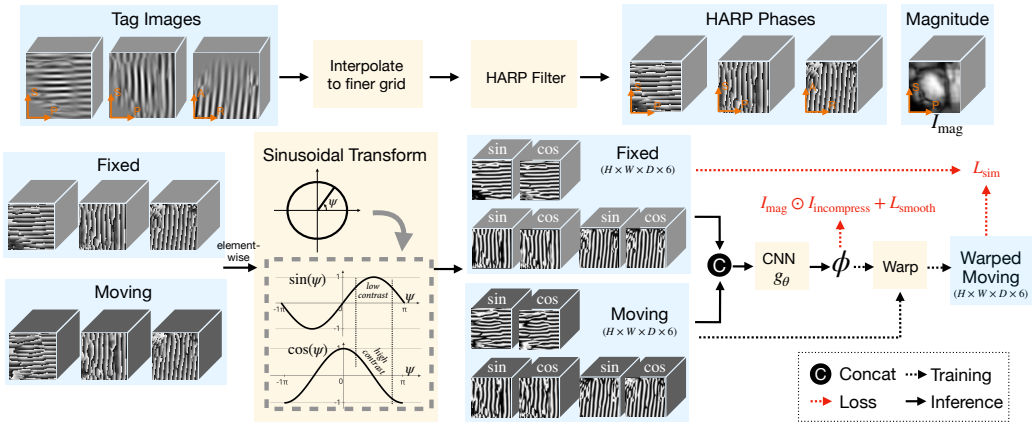


Figure 1: Top: HARP processing pipeline. Bottom: HARP phases of fixed and moving images are taken as input. They are first transformed by sinousoidal transformation and sent into UNet-like multi-channel registration network.

dynamics (Majda and Bertozzi, 2002; Ma and Wang, 2005; Aris, 2012) and image registration (Song and Leahy, 1991; Gorce et al., 1997). In this paper, we focus on their application to biological image registration. Previously, there have been two main types of approaches: iterative approaches (Mansi et al., 2009, 2011; Xing et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2023) and determinant-based approaches (Rappoport et al., 1995; Rohlfing et al., 2003; Haber and Modersitzki, 2004; Bistoquet et al., 2008). Iterative approaches incorporate incompressibility into diffeomorphic demons (Vercauteren et al., 2009) when updating the stationary velocity fields iteratively, making them computationally expensive. Determinant-based approaches focus on constraining the deformation field with a penalty on the Jacobian determinant of the deformation. This assumes that tissue can be deformed locally, but the volume (local and total) remains approximately constant. In the past, the Jacobian determinant constraint has been applied to achieve volume preservation during interactive deformation of volumetric models (Rappoport et al., 1995). It has also been used as an incompressibility regularization term to constrain coordinate transformation during B-spline-based nonrigid image registration (Rohlfing et al., 2003). However, this constraint is non-linear and requires ad-hoc numerical schemes that are computationally demanding (Haber and Modersitzki, 2004; Mansi et al., 2011). In contrast, we introduce a novel Jacobian determinant-based learning objective into the unsupervised deep learning-based registration framework and show its effectiveness in preserving volume and achieving a diffeomorphism. Furthermore, our learned model takes less than a second to process a single pair of frames, compared to tens of minutes required by previous work.

3. Method

HARP processing The harmonic phase (HARP) algorithm is a well-established method for processing and analyzing tagged MRIs (Osman et al., 2000). Specifically, HARP filtering involves extracting the first spectral peak in the Fourier domain of a tagged image slice

to obtain a complex-valued image, where the phase part (HARP phase) contains motion information and the magnitude part (HARP magnitude) contains anatomical information. Since tag images are typically acquired with lower through-plane resolution, they are interpolated onto a finer grid before HARP processing (Xing et al., 2017). Figure 1 shows the 3D tagged image processing using interpolation and HARP. Our method applies HARP filtering to the three interpolated tag volumes I_{Sh}, I_{Sv}, and I_{Av}. For example, for the vertically-tagged axial volume $I_{\text{Av}}(\boldsymbol{x})$, the complex image $J_{\text{Av}}(\boldsymbol{x})$ after HARP filtering is computed as follows:

$$J_{\text{Av}}(\boldsymbol{x}) = D_{\text{Av}}(\boldsymbol{x}) e^{j\Psi_{\text{Av}}(\boldsymbol{x})}\,, \tag{2}$$

where D_{Av} is the HARP magnitude volume and Ψ_{Av} is the HARP phase volume. The same notation applies for the horizaonally- and veritcally-tagged sagital volumes, yielding D_{Sh}, Ψ_{Sh}, D_{Sv}, and Ψ_{Sv}. We average over the three maginitude images to obatain I_{Mag}.

Sinousoidal transform Phase-based registration is recognized as more robust than intensity-based registration for dealing with tag fading, geometric distortions between frames, and noise (Fleet and Jepson, 1993; Hemmendorff et al., 2002). Interpolating phase values requires phase wrapping when the phase difference between two points exceeds π (Xing et al., 2017). However, phase wrapping is non-differentiable, which is a problem for deep learning-based registration methods, which typically rely on backpropagation in training.

To address this, we propose a simple sinusoidal transformation for phase images. Specifically, given a phase image Ψ, we apply element-wise sin and cos operations,

$$I^{\sin}(\boldsymbol{x}) = \sin(\Psi(\boldsymbol{x})) \quad \text{and} \quad I^{\cos}(\boldsymbol{x}) = \cos(\Psi(\boldsymbol{x})), \tag{3}$$

to obtain two corresponding images $(I^{\sin}, I^{\cos})$. Thus a phase value is uniquely associated with a $(\sin, \cos)$ pair and vice versa, i.e., one-one mapping. This transformation allows for smooth interpolation, while still retaining the robustness of phase-based registration to tag fading, distortions between frames, and noise. Additionally, the flat (low-contrast) regions and steep (high-contrast) region in sin and cos are compensated for by each other, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Multi-channel registration Harmonic phase is a material property that can be used to solve the aperture problem in optical flow by tracking the three harmonic phase values that come from three linearly independent tag directions. Instead of tracking phase values directly, we can track sinusoidal patterns due to the one-to-one mapping of our sinusoidal transform. Our task differs from existing registration networks (Balakrishnan et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022) which only take a single pair of fixed and moving images as input; as we need to match *multiple* fixed and moving sinusoidal images at the same time. We choose mean squared error (MSE) as our similarity loss during training:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{sim}} = \sum_{k \in \{\text{Av,Sh,Sv}\}} \sum_{l \in \{\sin,\cos\}} \text{MSE}(F_k^l, M_k^l \circ \boldsymbol{\phi})\,, \tag{4}$$

where

$$\boldsymbol{\phi} = g_\theta\left(\left\{F_k^l, M_k^l \mid k \in \{\text{Av}, \text{Sh}, \text{Sv}\}, l \in \{\sin, \cos\}\right\}\right)\,. \tag{5}$$

Incompressible constraint Volume preservation, also known as incompressibility, is crucial for biological image registration. To ensure this, we introduce a Jacobian determinant-

based learning objective on the transformation field to encourage incompressiblity:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{incompress}} = \sum_{\boldsymbol{x}} I_{\text{Mag}}(\boldsymbol{x}) \left|\log \max\left(\left|J_\phi(\boldsymbol{x})\right|, 0\right)\right| - \sum_{\boldsymbol{x}} \min\left(\left|J_\phi(\boldsymbol{x})\right|, 0\right) , \tag{6}$$

where I_{Mag} is the HARP magnitude image with a range of [0,1] and serves as a soft mask for soft tissue, such as the tongue. The first term penalizes the deviation of the Jacobian determinant $|J_\phi(\boldsymbol{x})|$ from unity and is spatially weighted by I_{Mag}. We introduced a second term in Equation (6) to prevent the shortcut solution where all determinants are negative; it is also found to be helpful in encouraging diffeomorphism (i.e., by directly penalizing negative determinants). The proposed loss encourages $\boldsymbol{\phi}$ to be incompressible in tissue regions and diffeormophic everywhere including in air gaps. While the L1 and L2 penalty $\left|\,|J_\phi(\boldsymbol{x})|-1\right|_{\{1,2\}}$ are also viable options, they were found to be less effective than Equation (6).

Overall training objective We encourage the spatial smoothness of the displacement $\boldsymbol{u}$, with the smoothness loss $\mathcal{L}_{\text{smooth}} = \sum_{\boldsymbol{x}} \|\nabla \boldsymbol{u}(\boldsymbol{x})\|^2$, thus the overall loss for training is $\mathcal{L}_{\text{total}} = \mathcal{L}_{\text{sim}} + \lambda \mathcal{L}_{\text{smooth}} + \beta \mathcal{L}_{\text{incompress}}$, where λ and β are hyper-parameters.

4. Experiments

Materials The present study included a dataset of 25 unique (subject-phrase) pairs, consisting of 8 healthy controls (HCs) and 2 post-partial glossectomy patients with tongue flaps. To capture tongue movement during speech, the participants were asked to say one or more phrase—"a thing", "a souk", or "ashell"—while tagged MRIs were acquired. The recorded phrases had a duration of 1 second, with 26 time frames captured during this period. The in-plane resolution of the MR images was 1.875 × 1.875 mm, and the slice thickness was 6 mm. The tagged MR images were collected using the CSPAMM pulse sequence in both sagittal (both vertical and horizontal tags) and axial (vertical tags only) orientations. The HC data was split into training, validation, and test datasets in a ratio of 0.6:0.2:0.2; patient data was reserved for testing. The images are manually cropped to include the tongue region and then zero-padded to $64 \times 64 \times 64$.

Network architecture As our goal is to explore the value of the proposed sinousoidal transformation and incompressible objective in a generic setting, we use the well-established 3D U-Net (Ronneberger et al., 2015) architecture with a convolutional kernel of size $(5 \times 5 \times 5)$ to increase the effective receptive field (Jia et al., 2022). To accommodate our multi-channel setting, we set the input channel of the first convolutional kernel to 12 to accept 6-channels from each of the fixed and moving sinusoidal images—sin and cos for each of the three acquired images. A scaling and squaring layer (Dalca et al., 2018) is used as the final layer to encourage our models to be diffeomorphic. To test the scalibility of our model, we trained a larger model "Ours-L" by doubling the number of intermediate feature channels.

Training details During training, fixed and moving image pairs are randomly selected from a speech sequence. We augment each pair of images with random center-crops during training. No overfitting is observed. The best loss weights (hyper-parameters) are determined by grid search for each model to ensure fair comparision. We set $\lambda = 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.4$ for the models denoted as "Ours" and "Ours-L". We set $\lambda = 0.08$ for the "Ours w/o inc." model where the $\mathcal{L}_{\text{incompress}}$ is not applied. In all experiments, we used the Adam optimizer with a batch size of one and a fixed learning rate of 1×10^{-4} throughout training.

Table 1: Quantitative measurement of performance on registration accuracy (w/ RMSE), incompressiblity (w/ Det_AUC), diffeomorphims (w/ NegDet), and speed (w/ Time). Wilcoxon signed-rank test is performed between "Ours" and others.

	Registration Acc: RMSE ↓			**Incompressibility: Det_AUC** ↑			**NegDet** (%) ↓	**Time** ↓ (s/pair)
	mean ± std	median	p	mean ± std	median	p	mean ± std	
PVIRA	0.153 ± 0.053	0.160	<0.001	0.936 ± 0.031	0.935	<0.001	0.000 ± 0.005	49
Ours w/o inc.	0.122 ± 0.041	0.126	<0.001	0.862 ± 0.077	0.870	<0.001	0.019 ± 0.039	<0.1
Ours	0.132 ± 0.045	0.137	–	**0.950 ± 0.038**	**0.956**	–	**0.000 ± 0.000**	<0.1
Ours-L	**0.122 ± 0.038**	**0.126**	<0.001	0.950 ± 0.039	0.956	<0.001	0.000 ± 0.001	<0.1

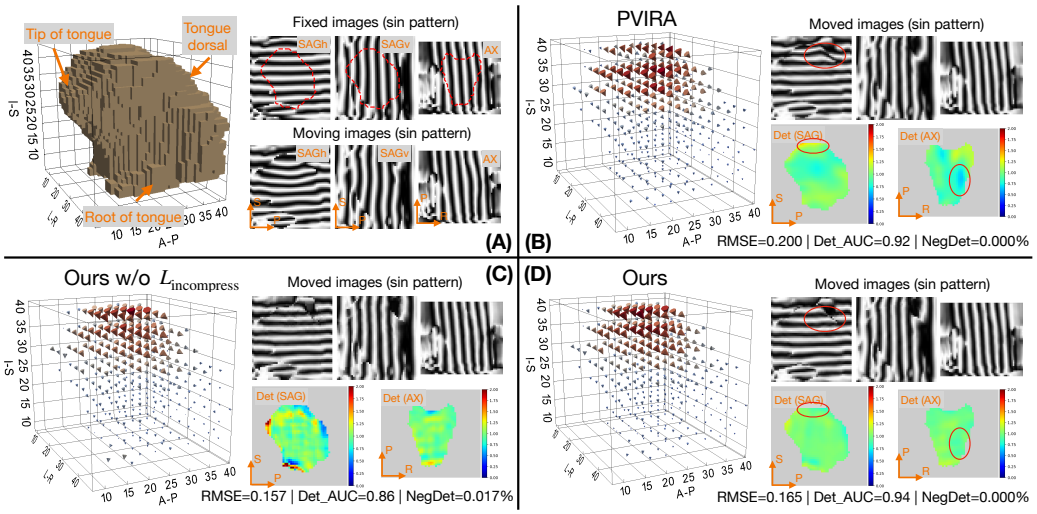


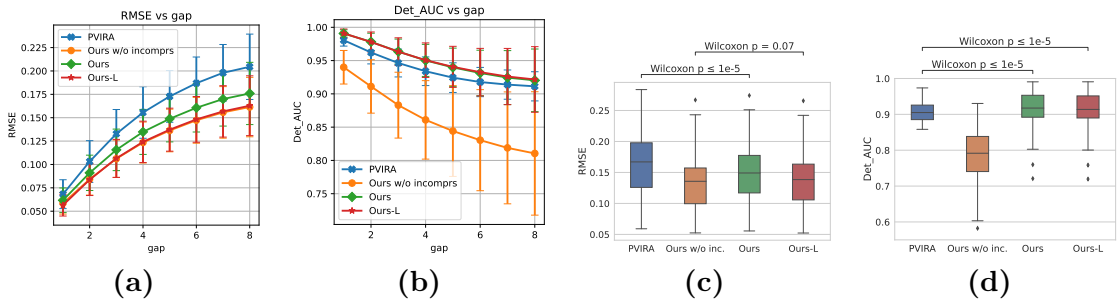
Figure 2: **(A)** An example of a fixed and moving frame pair is shown, with only the sin pattern displayed (the cos pattern is omitted). The contour of the tongue region is annotated in the fixed image with a red dotted line. **(B-D)** Results of three different methods are shown, including 3D motion field, the warped moving images, and a sagittal and an axial slice of the Jacobian determinant map.

5. Results

Registration accuracy It is often difficult to obtain the true dense motion field for evaluating the accuracy of registration algorithms. However, we can use the harmonic phase as a ground truth, as it is a property of tissue that moves with the tissue. The sinusoidal transformation is a one-to-one mapping between phase and sinusoidal pattern, so we use the root mean squared error (RMSE) between the sinusoidal-transformed fixed and moved images as a measure of registration accuracy. A more accurate motion field should better match the sinusoidal patterns of the fixed and moved images, resulting in a smaller RMSE.

Incompressibility A perfect incompressible flow field has a $|J_\phi(\boldsymbol{x})|$ of 1 everywhere. To assess incompressibility, we compute the histogram of determinant errors (ie. $\neq 1$) and weight it by I_{Mag}. We then calculate the area under the cumulative distribution function (CDF) curve (AUC) as a scalar metric. A higher AUC indicates a more incompressible motion field.

As shown in Table 1, our model (labeled "Ours") significantly outperforms PVIRA in terms of both registration accuracy and incompressibility. Without the proposed incom-



(a) **(b)** **(c)** **(d)**

Figure 3: Shown in **(a)** and **(b)** are the performance of the various methods against large motion. While **(c)** and **(d)** show performance on the pathological cases.

pressibility constraint ($\mathcal{L}_{\text{incompress}}$), "Ours w/o inc." model fails to preserve incompressibility and is non-diffeomorphic in some instances. However, it still performs well in terms of registration accuracy, indicating a general trade-off between these two factors. Interestingly, our larger model ("Ours-L") achieves the best registration accuracy of all the models while also maintaining nearly the same ability to estimate incompressible flow as the best model ("Ours"). Figure 2 shows an example when the subject initiates the utterance "a thing" from a nueral position, the tongue moves back and downward. The example shows our model accurately registers tags while maintaining incompressibility of the flow fields.

Degradation with large motion We also evaluated the methods on pairs of frames with different time gaps, which are assumed to be proportional to the magnitude of motion (within a short time window during speech, e.g., 8-frame window). As shown in Figure 3, our models degrade less severely as the motion becomes larger.

Generalizability to pathological subjects Our models also demonstrated consistent better performance on patients who have undergone a glossectomy , as shown in Figure 3. We note that our models were only trained on data from HCs and were then directly evaluated on patient data, without any fine-tuning. This demonstrates the generalizability of our models, despite their being trained on a different population.

6. Conclusion

We propose a sinusoidal transformation and determinant-based objective for unsupervised estimation of dense 3D incompressible motion fields from tagged MRI, which is robust to tag fading and large motion, and can generalize well to pathological data. We believe that the success of our preliminary tongue motion study indicates the potential of our proposed techniques for cardiac and brain motion tracking with tagged MRI.

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