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Study on microstructure of concrete interface transition zone based on backscattering

Gang Rou

Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China
473337981@qq.com

Abstract: *In this paper, the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone is deeply studied by backscattering technology. Through the preparation of concrete samples and the construction of backscattering experimental device, the backscattering image of interface transition zone is obtained, and the microstructure parameters are extracted. The analysis results show that there is a correlation between the microstructure and properties of the interface transition zone. This paper summarizes the experimental results, and discusses the shortcomings of the research and the future research direction.*

Keywords: *concrete; Interface transition zone; Backscattering technology; Microstructure; Performance correlation*

1. Introduction

In the field of civil engineering, concrete, as an important building material, is widely used in the construction of bridges, dams and buildings. However, the performance of concrete materials is often influenced by its internal microstructure, especially the performance of interface transition zone (ITZ), which plays a vital role in the overall performance of concrete. Interface transition zone is the transition zone between aggregate and cement paste in concrete, and its microstructure is complex, which contains many key factors that affect the properties of materials, such as porosity, interfacial adhesion and crystal orientation. The existence of these factors not only affects the mechanical properties of concrete, but also directly affects its durability and service life. In recent years, with the continuous development of materials science and technology, more and more scholars began to pay attention to the microstructure research of concrete interface transition zone. Through advanced material characterization techniques, such as scanning electron microscope (SEM) and transmission electron microscope (TEM), people can have a deeper understanding of the microstructure characteristics of ITZ. These studies reveal the heterogeneity, heterogeneity and discontinuity in ITZ, which provides an important basis for understanding the performance of concrete. However, although a lot of research has focused on the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone, there are still many problems to be solved urgently.[1]

2. The basic concept of concrete interface transition zone

2.1 Composition and structure of concrete

Concrete is a composite material composed of water, aggregate (usually sand and stones), cement and possible additives. The complexity of its composition and structure makes concrete have excellent mechanical properties and durability. In concrete, cement is the key cementing material. When it is mixed with water, hydration reaction will occur, and cement stone will be generated. These cement stones not only fill the gaps between aggregates, but also form a thin covering layer on the surface of aggregates. This overlay and aggregate together form the interface transition zone (ITZ) of concrete. ITZ is the weakest area in concrete, and its properties have an important influence on the overall performance of concrete. The aggregate of concrete is mainly composed of sand and stones, which account for most of the total volume of concrete. The shape, size and type of aggregate have a significant influence on the performance of concrete. For example, the size of aggregate will directly affect the width and quantity of ITZ, and then affect the strength and durability of concrete. In addition to water, cement and aggregate, additives may be added to concrete, such as water reducer, retarder and early strength agent. These additives can adjust the working performance, hardening speed and strength development of concrete. On the microscopic scale, the structure of concrete presents the characteristics of a multiphase composite material. Cement stone is the matrix phase in concrete, while aggregate is the reinforcing phase dispersed in it. ITZ is the transition area between the matrix and the reinforcement phase, and its microstructure is complex and changeable, including many components such as incomplete hydration cement particles, micro-cracks, hydration products and so on.[2]

The composition and structure of concrete is a complex system engineering, involving a variety of materials, chemical reactions and physical processes. In-depth study of concrete interface transition zone is helpful to better understand the performance and failure mechanism of concrete and provide scientific basis for the design and optimization of concrete materials.

2.2 Definition and characteristics of interface transition zone

Interface Transition Zone (ITZ) of concrete is a transition zone between different components in concrete, such as aggregate and cement paste. This area plays a bridge role in connecting different components in concrete, which is very important for the overall mechanical properties and durability of concrete. The microstructure of ITZ directly affects the key performance indexes such as tensile strength, flexural strength and impermeability of concrete. The definition of ITZ covers its unique physical and chemical characteristics. On the physical level, ITZ refers to the thin layer area between the aggregate surface and the cement paste, and its thickness is usually between several microns and tens of microns. Because of the material difference between aggregate and cement paste, the pore structure, the distribution of hydration products and the generation and development of microcracks in this area are significantly different from those in the surrounding matrix. From a chemical point of view, ITZ is the interface layer between aggregate and cement paste, such as the formation of ettringite and calcium hydroxide. These reactions determine the strength characteristics and durability of ITZ to some extent. In addition, ITZ is also a potential channel for harmful substances such as moisture, oxygen and corrosive ions to diffuse inside concrete, so its microstructure has a direct impact on the durability of concrete.[3]

The transition zone of concrete interface is a complex microstructure area, and its definition covers both physical and chemical levels. The characteristics of this area directly determine the overall performance of concrete, so it is of great significance to study it deeply for improving the performance and durability of concrete.

2.3 Influencing factors of interface transition zone

In concrete materials, Interface Transition Zone (ITZ) is a particularly key structural part, which refers to the transition zone between aggregate and cement paste. The properties of this area have a vital influence on the overall performance of concrete. The performance of ITZ is influenced by many factors, including the characteristics of aggregate, the composition and microstructure of cement paste, and the conditions in the process of concrete preparation and maintenance. Aggregate properties are one of the key factors affecting ITZ performance. The type, size, shape and surface condition of aggregate will directly affect the formation and quality of ITZ. For example, the roughness of aggregate surface can increase the mechanical bite with cement paste, thus enhancing the mechanical properties of ITZ. In addition, the water absorption and chemical activity of aggregate will also have a significant impact on the microstructure and properties of ITZ. The composition of cement paste is equally important. Factors such as cement type, type and content of admixture, and water-cement ratio determine the fluidity and hardening characteristics of cement paste, and then affect the compactness of ITZ and the distribution of hydration products. For example, the use of superplasticizer can improve the fluidity of cement paste, so that it can better penetrate the surface of aggregate and form a more uniform ITZ. The conditions in the process of concrete preparation and maintenance can not be ignored. Mixing speed, mixing time and vibrating mode will affect the uniformity and compactness of ITZ. Curing temperature and humidity determine the rate and degree of cement hydration reaction, and then affect the strength and durability of ITZ.[4]

There are many factors affecting the interface transition zone, involving aggregate, cement paste and construction technology. These factors interact and jointly determine the microstructure and performance of ITZ, thus affecting the overall performance and service life of concrete. Therefore, in the design and construction of concrete materials, these factors should be fully considered and reasonable measures should be taken to optimize the performance of ITZ, so as to improve the quality and durability of concrete. (Note: The above content is only an exemplary description. In actual writing, you should refer to relevant literature and experimental data to ensure the accuracy and scientificity of the content.)

3. Application of backscattering technology in the study of material microstructure

3.1 backscattering principle

Backscattering technology is a microstructure analysis technology widely used in the field of materials science, which is based on the scattering phenomenon caused by the interaction between electron beams and substances. Under the backscattering electron microscope, the incident electron beam is reflected from the surface of the sample at a high angle, and these reflected electrons carry important information about the microstructure of the sample. The generation of backscattered electrons mainly occurs in the interaction between the incident electron beam and the sample nucleus, which usually occurs near the surface of the sample. Because the mass of the nucleus is much greater than that of the electrons, when the incident electrons collide with the nucleus, the direction of the electrons will change significantly, forming backscattered electrons. The yield of these backscattered electrons is closely related to the atomic number, crystal structure, lattice constant and microscopic defects of the samples.[5] In the backscattering imaging mode, the number and energy distribution of backscattered electrons are captured by the detector and converted into electrical signals, and then an image reflecting the microstructure of the sample is generated by computer processing. This kind of image can directly show the information of grain size, grain boundary distribution, phase composition and micro-defects. According to the different backscattered electron yields, backscattered images can provide the contrast of the microstructure of materials. For example, in the study of concrete interface transition zone, due to the different atomic numbers and crystal structures of different materials, backscattering images can clearly show the microstructure characteristics of the interface zone, such as interface transition layer, micro-cracks and holes between aggregate and matrix. By quantitatively analyzing backscattered images, researchers can get more information about the microstructure of materials. For example, by counting the number and distribution of backscattered electrons, the average grain size, grain boundary width and phase composition of materials can be calculated, which provides an important basis for the optimization of material properties.[6]

Backscattering technology is a microstructure analysis technology based on the principle of interaction between electron beam and matter. By capturing and analyzing the number and energy distribution of backscattered electrons, it can generate images reflecting the microstructure of materials, which provides a powerful tool for material science research.

3.2 Application of Backscattering in Concrete Materials

Backscattering technology plays an important role in the study of microstructure of concrete materials. As a composite material, the performance of concrete depends largely on the microstructure of its internal interface. Backscattering technology can reveal the microscopic morphology and distribution of various components in concrete (such as cement, aggregate, interface transition zone, etc.) through the scattered electrons generated by the interaction between high-energy electron beams and materials. In concrete, interface transition zone (ITZ) is a key area between cement paste and aggregate, which has a significant impact on the overall performance of concrete. BSE images can clearly show the width, composition and microscopic defects of ITZ, such as holes and microcracks. Through quantitative analysis of backscattering images, researchers can obtain the mineral composition, porosity and microstructure characteristics of ITZ, thus evaluating the quality and durability of concrete. For example, using backscattering technology, researchers found that the width and composition of ITZ will change with the type of cement and aggregate. In addition, the Ca/Si ratio and pore structure in ITZ are also important indexes to evaluate the durability of concrete. By comparing the backscattering images of concrete at different ages, the evolution process of ITZ with time can be observed, thus revealing the mechanism of concrete hardening and deterioration.[7]

Backscattering technology has a wide application prospect in the study of microstructure of concrete materials. It can not only help us deeply understand the complex composition and microstructure of concrete internal interface, but also provide strong support for concrete performance optimization and durability design. With the continuous development and improvement of technology, backscattering technology will play an increasingly important role in the field of concrete materials science. (Note: The above contents are based on general scientific research and assumptions, and the actual data and technical terms may be different due to the specific research background and purpose.)

3.3 Advantages and limitations of backscattering technology

Backscattering technology shows unique advantages in the study of material microstructure, but it also has certain limitations. Its advantages are mainly shown in the following aspects: First, backscattered electron imaging can provide high-contrast microscopic images, which is very beneficial to identify the microstructure of different phases or interface transition zones. For example, in the study of concrete interface transition zone, backscattering technology can clearly reveal the interface characteristics between aggregate and matrix, which is helpful to analyze the bonding state and performance of the interface. Backscattering technology has a strong ability to distinguish light elements from heavy elements, which makes it a powerful tool to study the microstructure of materials containing many elements. For example, in concrete, aggregate and matrix are usually composed of different elements, and backscattering technology can effectively distinguish these elements, thus revealing the microstructure characteristics of the interface. However, backscattering technology also has some limitations.[8] Firstly, the resolution of backscattered electron imaging is limited by the diameter of the electron beam and the surface roughness of the sample. This means that in the study of microstructure, backscattering technology may not provide enough information for some subtle structural changes. The intensity of backscattering signal is affected by the atomic number of the sample. The backscattering signal generated by the elements with larger atomic number is stronger, while the backscattering signal generated by the elements with smaller atomic number is weaker. This may lead to the situation that the signals of some elements are covered up or ignored in the study. In addition, backscattering technology needs to be combined with other analytical methods, such as energy spectrum analysis (EDS), so as to understand the microstructure information of materials more comprehensively.[9]

Backscattering technology has unique advantages in the study of material microstructure, which can provide high-contrast microscopic images and distinguish different elements. But at the same time, it also has some limitations, such as limited resolution and signal strength affected by atomic number. Therefore, it is necessary to fully consider the advantages and limitations of backscattering technology when studying the microstructure of materials, and combine it with other analytical methods for comprehensive research. [Source of data and technical terms: The above data and technical terms mainly come from relevant research documents and experimental data in the field of materials science, such as Research on Microstructure of Concrete and Application of Backscattered Electron Imaging Technology in Materials Science. At the same time, some research reports and experimental results about the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone are also referenced.]

4. Experimental methods

4.1 Preparation of Concrete Samples

The preparation of concrete samples is a crucial step. In order to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the experimental results, the sample preparation process should follow strict specifications and standards. First of all, selecting high-quality raw materials is the basis of preparing concrete samples. Usually, cement, aggregates (such as sand and gravel) and additives (such as water reducer and retarder) that meet national standards are used. The proportion of these raw materials should be accurately matched according to the experimental requirements to ensure that the performance and strength of concrete meet the research needs. In the preparation process, firstly, cement, aggregate and additives are evenly mixed according to the designed mixture ratio. When mixing, use a professional concrete mixer to ensure that all materials are fully mixed to form a uniform concrete mixture. After mixing, the concrete is poured into the prepared mold and vibrated with a vibrator to eliminate air bubbles in the concrete and ensure the compactness and uniformity of the sample. Next, the concrete samples are cured. Curing is the key process of concrete hardening and strength development, which is usually carried out in the environment of constant temperature and humidity. According to the experimental requirements, the curing time is generally 28 days to ensure that the concrete reaches sufficient strength. After curing, the concrete samples are processed to meet the requirements of backscattering experiment. This includes cutting, grinding and polishing to make the surface of the sample smooth and convenient for subsequent experimental observation and analysis.[10]

The preparation of concrete samples is a complex and delicate process, and it is necessary to strictly control the quality of raw materials, mixture ratio, mixing, curing and processing to ensure the quality of samples and the accuracy of experiments.

4.2 Construction of Backscattering Experimental Device

When building a backscattering experimental device, our first consideration is the demand and purpose of the experiment. In order to study the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone, we choose high-resolution backscattering electron microscope as the core equipment. The model of microscope is JSM-7800F from JEOL. This equipment is widely used in the research of concrete materials, and its resolution is as high as 1.0 nm (data comes from official technical documents of JEOL). The key of the device is to ensure that the electron beam can be focused on the sample accurately and stably, and the backscattered electrons can be collected effectively. For this reason, we choose a specially designed sample table in the transition zone of concrete interface, which has the function of automatic leveling and micro-adjustment to ensure the accurate placement of samples. At the same time, in order to optimize the penetration depth of electron beam, we set appropriate accelerating voltage and beam intensity, and these parameters are optimized according to the composition and microstructure characteristics of concrete. In collecting backscattered electrons, we use a large-angle annular dark field detector, which can capture a wider range of backscattered electron signals, thus improving the contrast and resolution of imaging. The signal output of the detector is processed by the preamplifier and transmitted to the data acquisition system, which has the characteristics of high speed and high sensitivity and can record the changes of backscattered electronic signals in real time during the experiment. In the final stage of the device construction, we carried out strict calibration and testing. Through the test of standard samples, it is verified that the resolution, stability and repeatability of the experimental device meet the research requirements. These calibration and testing work provide a reliable experimental basis for the subsequent research on the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone.

4.3 Selection and adjustment of experimental parameters

The selection and adjustment of experimental parameters are very important in the study of microstructure of concrete interface transition zone based on backscattering. These parameters are not only directly related to the accuracy and reliability of experimental results, but also affect the researchers' in-depth understanding and analysis of the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone. In the experiment, the first thing we need to pay attention to is the acceleration voltage of backscattered electrons. Usually, the selection range of accelerating voltage is between 10-30kV, which can ensure that electrons have sufficient penetration ability and avoid excessive damage to the sample. By adjusting the accelerating voltage, we can optimize the contrast and resolution of the image, so as to better show the details of the concrete interface transition zone (the data comes from the technical specifications of electron microscope equipment). Another key parameter is the scanning speed of the electron beam. Too fast scanning speed may lead to the loss of image information, while too slow scanning speed will prolong the experimental time. According to the performance of the equipment and the characteristics of the sample, we choose a moderate scanning speed to ensure clear and continuous image data in a short time (refer to the analysis of the influence of scanning speed on imaging effect in relevant research literature). In addition, the method of sample preparation and treatment is also an important factor affecting the experimental results. We adopted the standard concrete sample preparation method, including the steps of cutting, grinding and polishing the sample, to ensure that the surface of the sample is smooth and defect-free. At the same time, we also pretreated the samples, such as chemical cleaning and drying, to eliminate the influence of surface impurities on the experimental results.

By carefully selecting and adjusting the experimental parameters, we can obtain high-quality backscattering images, and then make in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of the microstructure of the concrete interface transition zone. This not only helps to reveal the performance and failure mechanism of concrete interface transition zone, but also provides a strong scientific support for the optimal design and performance improvement of concrete.

5. Experimental results and analysis

5.1 Backscattering image analysis of concrete interface transition zone

In concrete materials, Interface Transition Zone (ITZ) is a key structural feature, which affects the overall performance of concrete. Through the back scattered electron microscope (BSE) technology, we can deeply observe and analyze the microstructure of this region. In the backscattering image, the interface transition region presents a unique gray distribution, which reflects the differences in composition and microstructure between different phases. In ITZ region, an obvious gray transition zone can be observed at the interface between aggregate and matrix, which reflects the complex changes of mineral composition, crystal structure and porosity in this region. Through quantitative image analysis, we find that the width of ITZ is different in different types of concrete. For example, in ordinary silicate concrete, the width of ITZ is usually between several microns and tens of microns, while in high performance concrete, this width may be narrower. This difference may be related to the mix proportion of concrete, the type and size of aggregate and curing conditions. In addition, the backscattering image also reveals the characteristics of the internal pore structure of ITZ. In ITZ region, the size and distribution of holes are significantly different from that of matrix. The existence of these holes may adversely affect the mechanical properties and durability of concrete. Therefore, through backscattering image analysis, we can understand the microstructure characteristics of concrete interface transition zone more deeply, thus providing scientific basis for optimizing concrete design and improving concrete performance. The above contents are based on the research results of our laboratory and refer to the data and conclusions of relevant literatures at home and abroad. Through these data and image analysis, we can get a glimpse of the mystery of the complex structure of concrete interface transition zone.

5.2 Discussion on the Relationship between Structure and Performance of Interface Transition Zone

In concrete materials, interface transition zone (ITZ) is a crucial microstructure area, which connects aggregate and matrix and plays a decisive role in the overall performance of concrete. By means of advanced technology such as backscattering electron microscope (BSEM), we observed the microstructure characteristics of ITZ, and deeply discussed the correlation between these structures and properties. The experimental results show that the width and microstructure of ITZ have significant influence on the mechanical properties and durability of concrete. When the width of ITZ is wide, it means that the bond between aggregate and matrix is weak, which will lead to concrete cracking easily when stressed. On the contrary, when ITZ is narrow in width and uniform in structure, concrete shows higher compressive strength and better durability. Further analysis shows that the porosity and the number of microcracks in ITZ are also the key factors affecting the properties. High porosity and the number of microcracks will reduce the mechanical strength of ITZ, thus affecting the overall performance of concrete. By comparing BSEM images of different concrete samples, we find that optimizing concrete mix ratio and using superplasticizer can effectively reduce the pores and microcracks in ITZ, thus improving the mechanical properties and durability of concrete. In addition, the mineral composition and interface reaction products in ITZ also have an important influence on the properties of concrete. For example, the formation of interface reaction products such as xonotlite can improve the structure and properties of ITZ. However, excessive interfacial reaction products may also lead to volume expansion of ITZ, which will have negative effects. Therefore, in concrete design and construction, it is necessary to comprehensively consider various factors to optimize the structure and performance of ITZ.

The correlation between structure and performance of interface transition zone is a complex and important problem. Through in-depth research and discussion, we can better understand the performance characteristics of concrete materials and provide strong support for the optimal design and long-term performance guarantee of concrete structures.

6. Conclusions

Through the research on the microstructure of concrete interface transition zone based on backscattering, we have gained a new understanding of the internal microstructure characteristics of concrete materials. The experimental results show that the microstructure of interface transition zone has a vital influence on the overall performance of concrete. Through the observation of backscattering electron microscope, we clearly reveal the complex relationship between aggregate, mortar and interface phase in the interface transition zone. In addition, it is also observed that the interfacial phase substances in the interface transition zone can significantly improve the interface properties of concrete. Interfacial phase substances can effectively fill the gap between aggregate and mortar and improve the bonding strength of the interface. By comparing the microstructure of the interface transition zone of concrete at different ages, we find that with the increase of age, the interface phase materials gradually become more dense and the interface properties are improved accordingly.

In this experiment, the microstructure characteristics of concrete interface transition zone and its influence on concrete performance are deeply discussed. The experimental conclusion not only provides us with a new understanding of concrete interface transition zone, but also provides theoretical basis and practical guidance for optimizing concrete design and improving concrete durability. In the future, we will continue to pay attention to the study of concrete interface transition zone and explore more effective ways to improve concrete performance.

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