## **BIOPHYSICS LETTER**



# Free boundary morphogenesis in living matter

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**Abstract** Morphogenetic theories investigate the creation and the emergence of form in living organisms. A novel approach for studying free boundary problems during morphogenesis is proposed in this work. The presence of mass fluxes inside a biological system is coupled with the local gradient of diffusing morphogens. The contour stability of a growing material is studied using a twodimensional system model with a rectilinear free border inside a Hele-Shaw cell. Modeling mass transport during morphogenesis allows fixing the velocity at the traveling wave solution as a function of one-dimensionless parameter. Performing a perturbation of the free boundary, the dispersion relation is derived in an implicit form. Although both the velocity of the moving front and the surface tension act as stabilizing effects at small wavelengths, the dispersion diagrams show that the rectilinear border is always unstable at large wavelengths. Further applications of this model can help give insights into a number of free boundary problems in biological systems.

**Keywords** Morphogenesis · Free boundary growth · Mass transport · Living matter

### Introduction

Morphogenesis can be defined as the branch of life sciences that investigates the creation and the emergence of form in living organisms. In a wide sense, morphogenetic processes result from both the genetic and the epigenetic

information defining the complex schemes of matter differentiation (Bard 1990). Such regulation tasks interrelate the biochemical processes at the molecular level with the macroscopic variations of the environmental conditions. These coordination mechanisms give rise to the functional adaptation of living matter over an incredible variety of shapes and structures.

From a theoretical viewpoint, much work has been done in the last decades to model the variation of mass and material properties in biological materials (Ambrosi et al. 2011). This highly interdisciplinary subject has involved a number of researchers with different scientific backgrounds, and many theoretical frameworks have been proposed. Nonlinear elastic theories have been successfully employed to describe how a geometrically incompatible volumetric growth can introduce residual stresses inside a biological material (Rodriguez et al. 1994). Using perturbation techniques it has been demonstrated that a bifurcation of the elastic equilibrium often occurs above a threshold volumetric growth, explaining the formation of various irregular shapes in soft tissues (Ciarletta and Ben Amar 2012). Mixture theory has proved to be more effective in problems where growth results from a mass exchange between the constituting phases, also taking into account the reaction-diffusion dynamics of biomolecules at the microscale (Byrne and Preziosi 2004). Moreover, discrete models are useful for describing systems of a relatively numerically tractable number of agents, irrespective of the specific domains (Drasdo and Höeme 2005).

The investigation of free boundary shape changes in such models typically consists of solving an ordinary differential equation inside the living matter coupled with at least one reaction-diffusion equations for the biomolecules. Many mathematical studies have aimed at reproducing the complex patterns in living systems by using phenomenological

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models with parabolic partial differential equations (Marrocco et al. 2010). Other researchers have focused on the contour instability in growing materials using biologically motivated constitutive laws and imposing balance equations for thermodynamical consistency (Ben Amar et al. 2011; Byrne and Chaplain 1996). Although much work has been done to improve the accuracy and the resolution of morphogenetic theories, existing models are still too qualitative in nature for building valuable tools and establishing confidence in predicted outcomes (Oden et al. 2010).

A novel approach for studying free boundary problems during morphogenesis is proposed in the following. The theoretical model is defined in the "Definition of the theoretical model" section, coupling the mass fluxes inside a living system with the local gradient of diffusing morphogens. The theory is later applied to a two-dimensional system model with a rectilinear frontier, whose traveling wave solution is given in the "Dimensionless equations and their traveling-wave solution" section. A linear stability analysis of the free boundary is presented in the "Linear stability analysis" section, deriving analytical conditions for the onset of a contour instability. Finally, I conclude and discuss the results of this work in the "Discussion and conclusion" section.

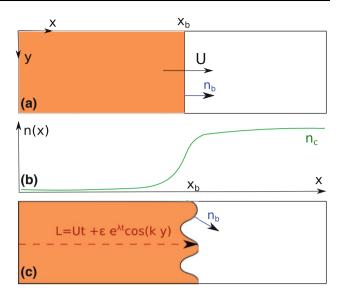
### Definition of the theoretical model

Let me consider a Hele-Shaw cell where a living material with a free rectilinear frontier (i.e., occupying a region  $x \le x_b$ ) is immersed into a spatial domain occupied by an inviscid fluid, as depicted in Fig. 1a. A morphogenetic signal may diffuse inside the cell, having an infinite reservoir at  $x \to \infty$ , which is not modified by the observed local dynamics (Fig. 1b). It is also known that the living matter possesses specific surface receptors that capture the morphogen at a typical uptake rate,  $\gamma_n$ . Thus, indicating with n the concentration of the morphogen, the reaction-diffusion equations inside the Hele-Shaw cell read:

$$\dot{n}(x, y, t) = \begin{cases} D_n \Delta n - \gamma_n n & \text{if } x \le x_b \\ D_n \Delta n & \text{if } x > x_b \end{cases}$$
 (1)

where  $D_n$  is the diffusion coefficient inside the cell.

It is now widely accepted in developmental biology that morphogenesis resides in both diffusion and transport mechanisms of morphogens, acting not only as patterning agents, but also as growth factors (Lecuit and Lenne 2007). In the following, I consider that the growth of the living matter is driven by the gradient of the morphogen concentration. In particular, using the thermodynamic arguments considered in (Ciarletta et al. 2012) under quasistatic conditions, a constitutive law for the spatial mass flux **m** is given as:



**Fig. 1** Schematics of the Hele-Shaw cell containing a living material (*orange*) expanding with a rectilinear free border at  $x = x_b$  (a). Distribution of the morphogen concentration n (*green line*) inside the cell (b). Perturbation of the rectilinear border with wavenumber k and growth rate  $\lambda$  (c)

$$\mathbf{m} = \mathbb{K}^{+}(n)\nabla\Psi(n) = \frac{\partial\Psi(n)}{\partial n}\mathbb{K}^{+}(n)\nabla n \tag{2}$$

where  $\Psi(n)$  is the free energy of the morphogen and  $\mathbb{K}^+(n)$  is a positive definite mobility tensor, whose functional dependence on n may represent different classes of biochemical reactions. According to Eq. (2), the balance of mass inside the biological material reads:

$$\frac{\mathrm{d}\rho}{\mathrm{d}t} = \nabla \cdot \mathbf{m} - \rho \nabla \cdot \mathbf{v} 
= \mathbb{K}^{+}(n)\nabla^{2}\Psi(n) + \nabla \mathbb{K}^{+}(n) \cdot \nabla \Psi(n) - \rho \nabla \cdot \mathbf{v}$$
(3)

where  $\mathbf{v}$  is the physical velocity field and  $\rho$  is the spatial density. In Eq. (3) I considered that morphogenesis only resides in mass diffusion, neglecting the presence of volumetric sources of mass.

Considering a very slow growth process and assuming that living matter macroscopically behaves as newtonian liquid moving at low Reynolds numbers, the mechanical equilibrium inside the Hele-Shaw cell is classically given by a Darcy law (Klappe 2004), being:

$$\mathbf{v} = -K_p \nabla p \tag{4}$$

where  $K_p$  is the porosity coefficient of the material, and p is the hydrostatic pressure. Substituting Eq. (4) in Eq. (3), the mass balance equation can be rewritten as:

$$\nabla \cdot \mathbf{m} - \rho \ \nabla \cdot \mathbf{v} = \nabla \cdot \left( \frac{\partial \Psi(n)}{\partial n} \mathbb{K}^{+}(n) \nabla n \right) + \rho K_{n} \ \Delta p = 0$$
 (5)

where we assumed that the biological matter is incompressible, being mostly composed by water



Equations (1, 5) govern the morphogenesis of the free boundary domain in this model. For mathematical consistency, four boundary conditions at the free border must be imposed. The Young-Laplace equation imposes mechanical equilibrium at the interface, being:

$$p = p_0 - \sigma C \quad \text{at} \quad x = x_b \tag{6}$$

where C is the local curvature (being equal to zero for a planar front),  $\sigma$  is the surface tension, and  $p_0$  is the constant outer pressure imposed inside the Hele-Shaw cell. Moreover, a compatibility condition imposes the continuity of the normal velocity at the interface, which reads:

$$\frac{d\mathbf{x}_b}{dt} \cdot \mathbf{n}_b = \mathbf{v}(x_b) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b \quad \text{at} \quad x = x_b \tag{7}$$

where  $\mathbf{n}_b$  is the outward unit vector at the free surface. Finally, the two remaining conditions are derived assuming that there are no singular sources of the morphogen, being:

$$n(x_b^-) = n(x_b^+); \quad \nabla n(x_b^-) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b = \nabla n(x_b^+) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b$$
 (8)

imposing the continuity of the morphogen concentration and of the chemical flux across the free boundary.

# Dimensionless equations and their traveling-wave solution

In order to make an analytical study of the stability of the governing equations, I assume a simple expression for the free energy of the morphogenetic signal and isotropic mobility tensor:

$$\Psi(n) = K_{\Psi} \cdot n; \quad \mathbb{K}^+(n) = K_m \mathbf{I} \tag{9}$$

where  $K_{\Psi}$ ,  $K_m$  are constant parameters representing the free energy per unit concentration and the motility coefficient of the morphogen, respectively.

Nondimensionalisation of the mathematical model involves the following dimensionless quantities:

$$t_c = \gamma_n^{-1}; \quad L_c = \sqrt{\frac{D_n}{\gamma_n}}; \quad v_c = \sqrt{D_n \gamma_n};$$

$$p_c = \frac{D_n}{K_p}; \quad n_c = n(x \to \infty)$$
(10)

where  $t_c$ ,  $L_c$ ,  $v_c$ ,  $p_c$ ,  $n_c$  are characteristic time, length, velocity, pressure, and chemical concentration, respectively. Using such characteristic values to obtain dimensionless variables (hereafter indicated with barred symbols), I can rewrite the Eqs. (1, 4, 5) in their dimensionless form, as follows:

$$\dot{\bar{n}}(R,t) = \begin{cases} \bar{\Delta}\bar{n} - \bar{n} & \text{if } \bar{x} \le \bar{x}_b \\ \bar{\Delta}\bar{n} & \text{if } \bar{x} > \bar{x}_b \end{cases}$$
(11)

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}} = -\nabla \bar{p} \tag{12}$$

$$\bar{\Delta}\bar{p} = -B\bar{\Delta}\bar{n}; \quad \text{with} \quad B = \frac{K_m K_{\Psi} n_c}{\rho D_n}$$
 (13)

Similarly, the boundary conditions in Eqs. (6–8) rewrite as:

$$\bar{p} = \bar{p}_0 - \bar{\sigma}\bar{C}; \quad \text{with} \quad \bar{\sigma} = \frac{\sigma K_p}{D_n} \sqrt{\frac{\gamma_n}{D_n}} \quad \text{at} \quad x = x_b$$

$$(14)$$

$$\frac{d\overline{\mathbf{x}}_b}{d\overline{t}} \cdot \mathbf{n}_b = \overline{\mathbf{v}}(x_b) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b \quad \text{at} \quad x = x_b$$
 (15)

$$\bar{n}(\bar{x}_b^-) = \bar{n}(\bar{x}_b^+); \quad \bar{\nabla}\bar{n}(\bar{x}_b^-) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b = \bar{\nabla}\bar{n}(\bar{x}_b^+) \cdot \mathbf{n}_b$$
 (16)

The mathematical model given by Eqs. (11–16) is entirely governed by the dimensionless parameters B and  $\bar{\sigma}$  defined in Eqs. (13, 14), which will control the stability properties of the free boundary during morphogenesis. In physical terms, B represents a ratio between morphogen-driven mass production and the mass evacuation rate driven by porosity, while  $\bar{\sigma}$  gives a ratio between the surface tension and the hydrostatic pressure.

For matters of notation compactness, I'll deal with dimensionless variables in the following sections, dropping the bar in their notation.

First, let me investigate the existence of traveling wave solutions of the problem. For this purpose, I will indicate with U the dimensionless velocity of the interface going from left to right, i.e., towards the highest concentration of the chemical signal. Considering a dimensionless variable  $\zeta = x - Ut$ , I can derive the reaction-diffusion dynamics by solving Eqs. (11, 16), as:

$$n_0(\zeta) = \begin{cases} n_0(0) \cdot e^{\frac{-U + \sqrt{U^2 + 4}\zeta}{2}\zeta} & \text{if } \zeta \le 0\\ 1 + (n_0(0) - 1) \cdot e^{-U\zeta} & \text{if } \zeta > 0 \end{cases}$$
 (17)

where  $n(-\infty) = 0$ ,  $n(\infty) = 1$ , and  $n_0(0) = \frac{2U}{U + \sqrt{U^2 + 4}}$  is the morphogen concentration at the free boundary. It is useful to remark that n(0) must be positive definite, so that the boundary expands with U > 0. Similarly, I can find the traveling wave for the pressure field imposing in Eqs. (13, 14) that  $p_0(0) = p_0$  and that  $p(-\infty)$  must be bounded, being:

$$p_0(\zeta) = -B(n_0(\zeta) - n_0(0)) + p_0 \quad \text{if } \zeta < 0 \tag{18}$$

Finally, the Dirichlet condition in Eq. (15) at the free boundary fixes the velocity of the traveling wave, which reads:

$$U = \frac{B - 1}{\sqrt{B}} \tag{19}$$

revealing that a traveling wave solution can appear if and only if B > 1.



### Linear stability analysis

The aim of this section is to study the stability of the traveling wave solution given by Eqs. (17, 18). Let  $\zeta(0)$  be a perturbation of the free boundary position, expressed in function of dimensionless variables in the moving frame as:

$$\zeta(0) = x_b - Ut = \epsilon \cdot e^{\lambda t} \cos(\kappa y) \tag{20}$$

where  $\kappa$  is the spatial wavenumber and  $\lambda$  is its growth rate, as depicted in Fig. 1c.

We can express the variations on p and n in the moving frame as follows:

$$p(x, y, t) = p_0(\zeta) + \epsilon \cdot p_1(\zeta) e^{\lambda t} \cos(\kappa y)$$
 (21)

$$n(x, y, t) = n_0(\zeta) + \epsilon \cdot n_1(\zeta) e^{\lambda t} \cos(\kappa y)$$
 (22)

where  $p_0(Z)$ ,  $n_0(Z)$  are the solutions of the unperturbed traveling wave solution moving along x.

From Eq. (11), I can find the solution for  $n_1(\zeta)$  imposing the continuity of the chemical concentration and its flux across the boundary:

$$n_1(\zeta) = \begin{cases} n_1(0) \cdot e^{\frac{-U + \sqrt{U^2 + 4(1 + \lambda + \kappa^2)}\zeta}{2}} & \text{if } \zeta \le 0\\ n_1(0) \cdot e^{\frac{-U - \sqrt{U^2 + 4(\lambda + \kappa^2)}\zeta}{2}} & \text{if } \zeta > 0 \end{cases}$$
(23)

where:

$$n_1(0) = -\frac{4U \cdot (U + \sqrt{U^2 + 4})^{-1}}{\sqrt{U^2 + 4(1 + \lambda + \kappa^2)} + \sqrt{U^2 + 4(\lambda + \kappa^2)}}$$
(24)

Substituting the solution for  $n_1(\zeta)$  in Eq. (13), I can find the governing equation for the perturbed pressure field (defined for  $\zeta \leq 0$ ) at first order:

$$p_{1}''(\zeta) - \kappa^{2} p_{1}(\zeta) + B n_{1}(0) \cdot \left[ \left( \frac{-U + \sqrt{U^{2} + 4(1 + \lambda + \kappa^{2})}}{2} \right)^{2} - \kappa^{2} \right] \times e^{\frac{-U + \sqrt{U^{2} + 4(1 + \lambda + \kappa^{2})}}{2} \zeta} = 0$$
(25)

where prime denotes derivative on  $\zeta$ . Equation (25) has the following general solution:

$$p_1(\zeta) = -Bn_1(0)e^{\frac{-U+\sqrt{U^2+4(1+\lambda+\kappa^2)}}{2}\zeta} + A \cdot e^{\kappa\zeta}$$
(26)

The boundary condition in Eq. (14) can be used for determining the value of the constant A in Eq. (26):

$$p_1(\epsilon \cdot e^{\lambda t} \cos(\kappa y)) = p_0(0) + (p'_0(0) + p_1(0))\epsilon \cdot e^{\lambda t}$$
  
=  $p_0 + \bar{\sigma}\kappa^2 \epsilon \cdot e^{\lambda t} \cos(\kappa y)$  (27)

giving at first order:

$$A = \bar{\sigma}\kappa^2 + B[n_1(0) + n_0'(0)] = \bar{\sigma}\kappa^2 + U + Bn_1(0)$$
 (28)

Finally, the dispersion equation can be derived from the boundary condition in Eq. (15), expressed at first order as:

$$-p_0''(0) - p_1'(0) = \lambda \tag{29}$$

which can be simplified as:

$$\lambda = -\bar{\sigma}\kappa^{3} - \kappa U + B\left[n_{0}''(0) + n_{1}(0) - \left(-\kappa + \frac{-U + \sqrt{U^{2} + 4(1 + \lambda + \kappa^{2})}}{2}\right)\right]$$
(30)

Substituting Eqs. (19, 24) in Eq. (30), I can express the dispersion equation as a function of the two dimensionless parameters  $B, \bar{\sigma}$  of the problem:

$$\lambda = -\bar{\sigma}\kappa^{3} - \kappa \frac{B-1}{\sqrt{B}} + \frac{B-1}{B}$$

$$-\frac{(B-1) \cdot \left(-2\kappa - \frac{B-1}{\sqrt{B}} + \sqrt{\frac{(B+1)^{2}}{B}} + 4(\lambda + \kappa^{2})\right)}{\sqrt{\frac{(B-1)^{2}}{B} + 4(\lambda + \kappa^{2})} + \sqrt{\frac{(B+1)^{2}}{B} + 4(\lambda + \kappa^{2})}}$$
(31)

The dispersion relation in Eq. (31) involves the dimensionless growth mode  $\lambda$  and wavenumber  $\kappa$  in an implicit way. In Figs. 2 and 3, I show the dispersion diagrams obtained through numerical iteration techniques for different values of the dimensionless parameters B and  $\bar{\sigma}$ . I find that both the surface tension and the boundary velocity are stabilizing effects at small wavelengths, but the free boundary is always unstable at large wavelengths, developing undulated structures with typical length of about  $2\pi/\kappa(\lambda_{\rm max}) \cdot \sqrt{D_n/\gamma_n}$ .

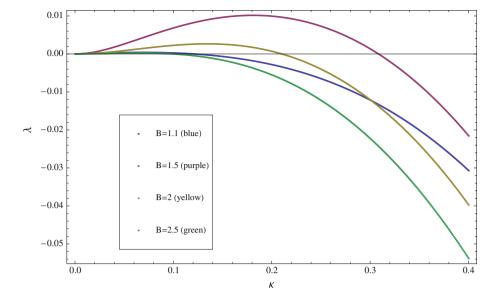
### Discussion and conclusion

In this work, the contour stability of a growing living material has been studied using a two-dimensional system model inside a Hele-Shaw cell. In the "Definition of the theoretical model" section, a novel theoretical model of free boundary morphogenesis has been defined. In Eq. (2) the mass flux inside the living matter is assumed to depend on the local gradient of a morphogen, whose dynamics are governed by the reaction-diffusion equations in Eq. (1). The biological material is considered as an incompressible newtonian fluid, so that the equilibrium equation in Eq. (4) is a Darcy law. The mass balance is imposed by Eq. (5), while the boundary conditions at the free rectilinear interface are given in Eqs. (6–8).

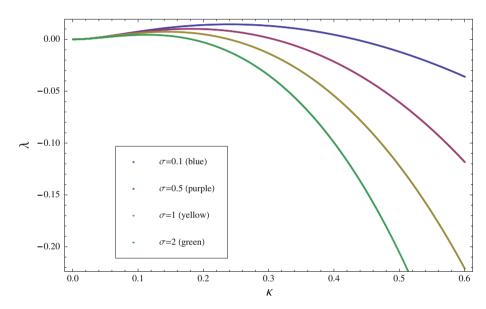
In the "Dimensionless equations and their travelingwave solution" section, the governing equations have been rewritten, in their dimensionless form and a traveling wave solution is given in Eqs. (17, 18). In particular, the velocity



Fig. 2 Dispersion diagrams shown at different values of the dimensionless parameter  $B = \frac{K_m K_\Psi n_c}{\rho D_n}$ . The curves have been numerically obtained using the Newton algorithm, setting  $\sigma = 0.5$ 



**Fig. 3** Dispersion diagrams shown at different values of the dimensionless parameter  $\bar{\sigma} = \frac{\sigma K_P}{D_n} \sqrt{\frac{\gamma_n}{D_n}}$ . The curves have been numerically obtained using the Newton algorithm, setting B=1.5



of the moving front is fixed in Eq. (19) as a function of the dimensionless parameter B, defined in Eq. (13). It is interesting to notice that modeling mass transport in morphogenesis allows overcoming the problem to fix the velocity at the moving boundary, which stays undetermined when considering only volumetric growth (Hartmann and Miura 2007).

In the "Linear stability analysis" section, a linear stability analysis of the traveling wave solution has been reported. Performing a perturbation of the free boundary as in Eq. (20), an implicit relation has been derived in Eq. (31) as a function of the wavenumber  $\kappa$  and the growth rate  $\lambda$  of the perturbation. The dispersion diagrams have been numerically obtained as depicted in Figs. 2 and 3.

Although both the velocity of the moving front and the surface tension act as stabilizing effects at small wavelengths, the dispersion diagrams show that the rectilinear border is always unstable at large wavelengths. Accordingly, the linear stability indicates that the rectilinear free boundary rapidly develops growing undulations. This result is in agreement with some experimental results on epithelial cells (Poujade et al. 2007), showing the formation of fingering instabilities in expanding free rectilinear surfaces of cellular monolayers. Further applications of this model can be envisaged for studying the morphology of self-organizing bacterial communities, whose swarming over a synthetic surface is found to create remarkable hyperbranched dendritic shapes (Marrocco et al. 2010).



In conclusion, the application of the proposed model can help giving insights in a number of free boundary problems of biological systems. Typical examples concern the dynamics of the wound healing processes, whose effectiveness depend on the coupling between motility and the cell proliferation rate (Maini et al. 2004), and the optimization of tissue scaffolds, where the feedback between growth rate and geometry must be deciphered (Rumpler et al. 2008). Further work must be addressed for extending the analysis of the free boundary instabilities in a nonlinear regime. In this sense, the development of simulation tools might be useful to study the occurrence of branching phenomena, such as those observed during the differentiation of many developing organs (Davies 2006).

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