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L^∞ -ERROR ESTIMATES FOR VARIATIONAL INEQUALITIES WITH HÖLDER CONTINUOUS OBSTACLE (*)

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Abstract — An error estimate is derived, using a linear finite element method, for the L^∞ -approximation of the solution of variational inequalities with Hölder continuous obstacle. If the obstacle is in $C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$ ($0 < \alpha \leq 1$), then the L^∞ -error for the linear element solution is in the order of $h^{\alpha-\varepsilon}$ ($\forall \varepsilon > 0$).

Resume. — On démontre que l'erreur d'approximation dans la norme L^∞ de la solution d'une inéquation variationnelle, avec obstacle α -holdérien ($0 < \alpha \leq 1$), par la méthode des éléments fins linéaires, est de l'ordre $h^{\alpha-\varepsilon}$, pour tout $\varepsilon > 0$.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interest for the study of variational inequalities (V.I.) with « irregular » obstacles has recently increased. Regularity properties of solutions have been proved for V.I. with Hölder continuous ([4], [7], [8], [12]), continuous [12], or one-sided Hölder continuous [13] obstacles.

The importance of such results lies in particular in their application to the theory of quasi-variational inequalities (Q.V.I.), namely V.I. with the obstacle depending on the solution itself. Such an implicit obstacle, in fact, is in general “fairly irregular” (see [3] for some examples connected to stochastic control theory).

From a numerical point of view, some recent results are known concerning the approximation of solutions of Q.V.I. connected to some stochastic impulse control problems (see [11], [15]), by means of finite element methods.

The aim of this paper is to show an error estimate in the L^∞ norm, for the approximation, by means of linear finite elements, of the solution of variational

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inequalities with Hölder continuous obstacle. If the obstacle is in $C^{0,\alpha}(\overline{\Omega})$, $0 < \alpha \leq 1$ (so that, according to the mentioned regularity results, the solution itself is in $C^{0,\alpha}(\overline{\Omega})$), then, under reasonable hypotheses on the triangulation, the L^∞ -error of such an approximation is in the order of $h^{\alpha-\varepsilon}$ (for each $\varepsilon > 0$), that is the expected order of convergence.

In § 2 we introduce some notations and we recall the regularity of solutions. In § 3 the discretization is studied, and we state our principal result (theorem 3.2) together with some remarks and corollaries. In § 4 we indicate some useful results which are needed, in § 5, to prove theorem 3.2.

2. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

Let Ω be a convex bounded domain of \mathbb{R}^N , with sufficiently smooth boundary Γ (we suppose for example $\Gamma \in C^2$).

With classical notations, $C^{0,\alpha}(\overline{\Omega})$, $0 < \alpha < 1$ [$\alpha = 1$], is the space of all the Hölder [Lipschitz] continuous functions of exponent α over Ω , with the seminorm

$$[v]_\alpha = \sup_{\substack{x,y \in \overline{\Omega} \\ x \neq y}} \frac{|v(x) - v(y)|}{|x - y|^\alpha}.$$

For $p \geq 1$, we let $L^p(\Omega)$ denote the classical Banach space consisting of measurable functions on Ω that are p -integrable, with the norm

$$\begin{aligned} \|v\|_p &= \left(\int_{\Omega} |v|^p dx \right)^{1/p} & \text{if } 1 \leq p < +\infty, \\ \|v\|_\infty &= \text{ess. sup}_{\Omega} |v| & \text{if } p = \infty. \end{aligned}$$

Then for $p \geq 1$, $m \in \mathbb{N}$, $W^{m,p}(\Omega)$ is the classical Sobolev space defined by

$$W^{m,p}(\Omega) = \{ v : D^\gamma v \in L^p(\Omega), \text{ for all } |\gamma| \leq m \};$$

in $W^{m,p}(\Omega)$ we introduce the norm

$$\|v\|_{m,p} = \sum_{|\gamma| \leq m} \|D^\gamma v\|_p,$$

and we set $H^m(\Omega) = W^{m,2}(\Omega)$; then $H_0^1(\Omega)$ is the closure, in the norm of $W^{1,2}(\Omega)$, of $C_0^1(\Omega)$, the space of all continuous functions with compact support in Ω , having all first derivatives continuous in Ω .

In the following c will be the notation for positive constants involved in calculation, and the terms on which c depends will be clarified each time.

Let A be the second order linear elliptic operator defined by

$$A = - \sum_{i,j=1}^N \frac{\partial}{\partial x_j} \left(a_{ij}(x) \frac{\partial}{\partial x_i} \right) + \sum_{i=1}^N b_i(x) \frac{\partial}{\partial x_i} + c_0(x),$$

with the following assumptions :

- i) $a_{ij} \in C^1(\bar{\Omega})$, $b_i, c_0 \in L^\infty(\Omega)$, $i, j = 1, 2, \dots, N$;
- ii) There is a constant $\nu > 0$ such that (uniform ellipticity) :

$$\sum_{i,j=1}^N a_{ij}(x) \xi_i \xi_j \geq \nu |\xi|^2, \text{ a.e. in } \Omega, \forall \xi \in \mathbb{R}^N - \{0\};$$

iii) $c_0(x) \geq \bar{c} > 0, \forall x \in \Omega$, with \bar{c} sufficiently large (such that A is a coercive operator on the space $H_0^1(\Omega)$).

Let $a(\cdot, \cdot) : H_0^1(\Omega) \times H_0^1(\Omega) \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ be the continuous and coercive bilinear form on $H_0^1(\Omega)$ associated with the operator A , namely, $\forall u, v \in H_0^1(\Omega)$,

$$a(u, v) = \sum_{i,j=1}^N \int_{\Omega} a_{ij} \frac{\partial u}{\partial x_i} \frac{\partial v}{\partial x_j} dx + \sum_{i=1}^N \int_{\Omega} b_i \frac{\partial u}{\partial x_i} v dx + \int_{\Omega} c_0 uv dx.$$

Let us now consider an “obstacle problem” for the operator A , i.e. the following V.I. with homogeneous boundary conditions :

$$\begin{aligned} a(u, v - u) &\geq (f, v - u), \quad \forall v \in \mathbb{K} \\ &u \in \mathbb{K} \end{aligned} \tag{2.1}$$

where $\mathbb{K} = \{v \in H_0^1(\Omega) : v \geq \psi \text{ in } \Omega\}$ is a closed convex subset of $H_0^1(\Omega)$, and

$$f \in L^\infty(\Omega), \tag{2.2}$$

$$\psi \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega}), \quad 0 < \alpha \leq 1, \tag{2.3}$$

are two given functions. We assume $\psi|_{\Gamma} \leq 0$, in order to avoid \mathbb{K} being empty. Then the following regularity result is known :

THEOREM 2.1 : *Under the assumptions (2.2) and (2.3), the unique solution u of problem (2.1) is in $C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$.*

The proof in the interior of Ω can be deduced for example from Caffarelli-Kinderlehrer [7], where it is shown that the solution of problem (2.1) has the same modulus of continuity of the obstacle. For a general proof we refer to Frehse [12], where the nonlinear case has been considered. For the case $\alpha = 1$, see also Chipot [8]. Lastly we mention the result of Biroli [4] : $u \in C^{0,\alpha'}(\bar{\Omega})$, $\alpha' < \alpha$, if more general boundary conditions are involved.

3. DISCRETIZATION AND PRINCIPAL RESULT

Let Ω_h denote a polyhedral domain inscribed in Ω , such that the diameter of every "face" of $\Gamma_h = \partial\Omega_h$ has length less than h . Let us consider that over Ω_h a "triangulation" \mathcal{T}_h is defined (in the usual way, see [9]), regular, in the sense that, setting $\forall T \in \mathcal{T}_h$:

$$h_T = \text{diam}(T),$$

$$\rho_T = \sup \{ \text{diam}(B) : B \subset T \text{ is a ball in } \mathbb{R}^N \},$$

then :

i) there is a constant σ such that, $\forall T \in \mathcal{T}_h, \frac{h_T}{\rho_T} \leq \sigma$;

ii) $h \geq \max_{T \in \mathcal{T}_h} h_T$.

A piecewise linear subspace V_h can be defined on $\bar{\Omega}$ in the following way

$$V_h = \{ v \in C^0(\bar{\Omega}) : v|_T \text{ is a linear function, } \forall T \in \mathcal{T}_h ; v \equiv 0 \text{ in } \bar{\Omega} - \Omega_h \}.$$

Let us denote by $\{ P_i \}_{i=1}^{r(h)}$ the internal nodes of \mathcal{T}_h . Then the functions $\{ \phi_i \}_{i=1}^{r(h)}$ of V_h such that

$$\phi_i(P_j) = \delta_{ij}, \quad i, j = 1, 2, \dots, r(h),$$

form a basis of V_h ; in particular for every $v \in C^0(\bar{\Omega}) \cap H_0^1(\Omega)$ the function

$$v_I(x) = \sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} v(P_i) \phi_i(x) \tag{3.1}$$

represents the interpolate of v over \mathcal{T}_h .

Furthermore, from the definition of \mathcal{T}_h ,

$$P_i \in \partial T \Rightarrow T \subset B(P_i, h), \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, r(h), \quad \forall T \in \mathcal{T}_h,$$

where $B(P_i, h)$ is the ball of \mathbb{R}^N with its center in P_i and radius h ; then

$$\text{supp } \phi_i \subset \overline{B(P_i, h)}, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, r(h). \tag{3.2}$$

Now let us consider the discrete problem associated with (2.1) :

$$a(u_h, v_h - u_h) \geq (f, v_h - u_h), \quad \forall v_h \in \mathbb{K}_h$$

$$u_h \in \mathbb{K}_h \tag{3.3}$$

where $\mathbb{K}_h = \{ v_h \in V_h : v_h \geq \psi_h \}$, and ψ_h is the piecewise linear function on Ω

equal to ψ at the nodes of \mathcal{T}_h (and defined on every connected component of $\Omega - \Omega_h$ by a constant extension in directions normal to Γ_h , see [6]).

REMARK 3.1 : Such a choice of \mathbb{K}_h means that the constraint $u_h \geq \psi$ is only imposed over the internal nodes of \mathcal{T}_h . It could in fact be defined in an equivalent way :

$$\mathbb{K}_h = \{ v_h \in V_h : v_h(P_i) \geq \psi(P_i), i = 1, 2, \dots, r(h) \} . \quad \blacksquare$$

Let $M_h = (m_{ij})$ be the matrix of problem (3.3), i.e. the real $r(h) \times r(h)$ matrix whose generic term is

$$m_{ij} = a(\phi_j, \phi_i), \quad i, j = 1, 2, \dots, r(h) .$$

The following assumption is needed :

$$m_{ij} \leq 0 \quad \text{if} \quad i \neq j, \quad i, j = 1, 2, \dots, r(h); \tag{3.4}$$

then, by the hypotheses on the coefficients of A , M_h is an M -matrix, and the discrete problem (3.3) satisfies a discrete maximum principle, in the sense of [10] (where conditions of essentially geometric type on the triangulation \mathcal{T}_h are given, under which (3.4) holds).

The solution u_h of (3.3) represents the approximation of the solution u of (2.1) in the linear finite element discretization. Under the previous assumptions we are able to obtain an error estimate, in L^∞ norm, for such an approximation.

Namely, our principal result is :

THEOREM 3.2 : If (2.2), (2.3), (3.4) hold, then $\forall p > 1$

$$\| u - u_h \|_\infty \leq ch^{\alpha - N/p} | \log h | , \tag{3.5}$$

where c depends on Ω, ψ, p , and α , not on h .

Estimate (3.5) is quasi-optimal. In fact the interpolation error in L^∞ for Hölder continuous functions in $C^{0,\alpha}(\overline{\Omega})$ is a $O(h^\alpha)$. Here this result is shown under the hypotheses :

$$u|_\Gamma = 0 ; \tag{3.6}$$

$$\text{dist}(\Gamma, \Gamma_h) \leq ch^2 . \tag{3.7}$$

Condition (3.6) can be easily eliminated. It should also be noted that, under the assumptions made on Ω (convex, with $\Gamma \in C^2$), it is always possible to construct Ω_h such that (3.7) holds. (We remark that, in the non-convex case, assuming condition (3.7) as an hypothesis, we still obtain an estimate such as (3.5).)

LEMMA 3.3 : If $u \in C^{0,\alpha}(\overline{\Omega})$, $0 < \alpha \leq 1$, and conditions (3.6), (3.7) are satisfied, then

$$\|u - u_I\|_\infty \leq ch^\alpha,$$

where c depends only on u , α and Ω .

Proof. — From the definition (3.1) (since $\sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x) \leq 1, \forall x \in \overline{\Omega}$):

$$|u(x) - u_I(x)| \leq \left(1 - \sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x)\right) |u(x)| + \sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x) |u(x) - u(P_i)|; \quad (3.8)$$

the first term in the right hand side of (3.8) is either equal to zero (when x belongs to the convex envelope of the internal nodes, $\sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x) = 1$), or, in the other case, it is less than $ch^{2\alpha}$ (from (3.7)). For the second term we have

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x) |u(x) - u(P_i)| &\leq [u]_\alpha \sum_{i=1}^{r(h)} \phi_i(x) |x - P_i|^\alpha \\ &\leq [u]_\alpha h^\alpha, \end{aligned}$$

since, from (3.2), $\phi_i(x) \neq 0$ implies $|x - P_i| < h$. ■

As a corollary of theorem 3.2 we have an approximation result for the set $D = \{x \in \Omega : u(x) > \psi(x)\}$, where the solution does not touch the obstacle. The boundary of D is the so-called free boundary, and it is in many cases the real unknown of problems such as (2.1). Usually the convergence of u_h to u is not enough to ensure the convergence to D (in set theoretical sense) of sets $D_h = \{x \in \Omega : u_h(x) \geq \psi(x)\}$. However, theorem 3.2 implies :

COROLLARY 3.4 : Under the same assumptions of theorem 3.2, the sequence $\{D_{h,\varepsilon}\}$, where

$$D_{h,\varepsilon} = \{x \in \Omega : u_h(x) > \psi(x) + h^{\alpha-\varepsilon}\},$$

“converges from the interior” to $D, \forall \varepsilon > 0$, in the sense that :

- a) $\lim_{h \rightarrow 0^+} D_{h,\varepsilon} = D$ (in set theoretical sense);
- b) $D_{h,\varepsilon} \subset D$, if h is sufficiently small.

(See [2] for the proof.)

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Let us state some useful results in order to prove theorem 3.2.

— *A priori estimates*

The following relation between solutions and obstacles of two different V.I. is well known (see [5]) :

LEMMA 4.1 : Let u [resp. w] $\in H_0^1(\Omega)$ be the unique solution of a V.I. such as (2.1), with obstacle ψ [resp. φ] $\in L^\infty(\Omega)$; then

$$\| u - w \|_\infty \leq \| \psi - \varphi \|_\infty .$$

The discrete analogue of lemma 4.1 is also valid (see [11]) :

LEMMA 4.2 : Let u_h [resp. w_h] $\in V_h$ denote the approximation of u [resp. w] given by problem (3.3); if M_h satisfies (3.4), then

$$\| u_h - w_h \|_\infty \leq \| \psi_h - \varphi_h \|_\infty .$$

— *V.I. with $W^{2,p}$ -obstacle*

Let us consider a V.I. such as (2.1), with the assumption (2.2), but now let $\psi \in W^{2,p}(\Omega)$. Then it is well known [14] that the solution u is in $W^{2,p}(\Omega)$. Baiocchi [1] and Nitsche [17] have already studied the approximation for the solution of this problem. In particular we have :

THEOREM 4.3 : Let $f \in L^p(\Omega)$, $\psi \in W^{2,p}(\Omega)$, $\forall p < +\infty$; if (3.4) holds, then

$$\| u - u_h \|_\infty \leq ch^{2-N/p} | \log h | \{ \| u \|_{2,p} + \| \psi \|_{2,p} \}, \quad \forall p < +\infty, \quad (4.1)$$

c independent of h .

Proof of theorem 4.3 can be easily derived from [1], by means of the interpolation theory (see [9]), and of error estimates in L^∞ for solutions of equations. Estimates such as (4.1) hold in fact for equations with solutions in $W^{2,p}(\Omega)$: they can be stated using Nitsche's techniques of weighted norms ; when $A = -\Delta$, see also [18], where a quasi-optimality result in L^∞ is given for the H_0^1 -projection into finite element spaces.

5. PROOF OF THEOREM 3.2

Without loss of generality, let us consider $\psi|_{\Gamma} = 0$ (such that in problem (3.3) now $\psi_h = \psi_I$); it can be shown in fact that solution u of (2.1) is equal to solution \hat{u} of

$$\begin{aligned} a(\hat{u}, z - \hat{u}) &\geq (f, z - \hat{u}), \quad \forall z \in H_0^1(\Omega), \quad z \geq \hat{\psi} \\ \hat{u} &\in H_0^1(\Omega), \quad \hat{u} \geq \hat{\psi} \end{aligned}$$

where $\hat{\psi} = \psi \vee u_0$, and u_0 is the solution of the related equation

$$\begin{aligned} a(u_0, v) &= (f, v), \quad v \in H_0^1(\Omega) \\ u_0 &\in H_0^1(\Omega). \end{aligned}$$

We have $u_0 \in W^{2,p}(\Omega)$, $\forall p < +\infty$: hence $\hat{\psi} \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$, with the same α of ψ .

The proof of theorem 3.2 is based on a regularization procedure, consisting in the ‘‘approximation’’ of the initial problem by means of ‘‘more regular’’ V.I. (namely with $W^{2,p}$ -obstacle, $\forall p < +\infty$), for which we can apply theorem 4.3. We then conveniently ‘‘go back’’ to problem (2.1), through continuity results. This procedure can be divided into four steps.

Step 1 : Regularization by convolution.

LEMMA 5.1 : *There is a sequence $\{\psi^n\}$ converging to ψ in L^∞ , such that, $\forall n$,*

$$\psi^n \in C^1(\bar{\Omega}), \quad \psi^n|_{\Gamma} = 0, \tag{5.1}$$

$$\|\psi^n - \psi\|_\infty \leq cn^{-\alpha}, \tag{5.2}$$

$$\|\psi^n\|_{C^1(\bar{\Omega})} \leq cn^{1-\alpha}, \tag{5.3}$$

where c depends on ψ, α, Ω , but not on n .

Proof : See [4]; (5.1) can be shown using convolutions of ψ with suitable mollifiers and cut-off functions. ■

Let us call u^n the solution of the V.I. (2.1) with obstacle ψ^n , and u_h^n the solution of the corresponding discrete problem (where now the obstacle is ψ_I^n).

Step 2 : Elliptic regularization.

LEMMA 5.2 : *For every fixed n , there is a sequence $\{\psi^{n,m}\}$ converging, for $m \rightarrow +\infty$, to ψ^n in L^∞ , such that $\forall m, \psi^{n,m}$ is the solution of*

$$\begin{cases} m^{-1} A\psi^{n,m} + \psi^{n,m} = \psi^n \\ \psi^{n,m}|_{\Gamma} = 0 \end{cases}$$

and

$$\psi^{n,m} \in W^{2,p}(\Omega), \quad \forall p < +\infty;$$

$$\|\psi^{n,m} - \psi^n\|_\infty \leq cm^{-1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty, \quad (5.4)$$

$$\|A\psi^{n,m}\|_\infty \leq cm^{1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty, \quad (5.5)$$

where c does not depend on m and n .

(For the proof see [4] again.)

As we did in Step 1, let us call $u^{n,m}$ the solution of the V.I. (2.1) with obstacle $\psi^{n,m}$, and $u_h^{n,m}$ the solution of the corresponding discrete problem. Of course $u^{n,m} \in H_0^1(\Omega) \cap W^{2,p}(\Omega)$, $\forall p < +\infty$; it follows

$$\|u^{n,m}\|_{2,p} \leq c \|Au^{n,m}\|_p \leq c \|Au^{n,m}\|_\infty.$$

Furthermore the following inequality of Lewy-Stampacchia's type holds (see e.g. [16]) :

$$f \leq Au^{n,m} \leq (A\psi^{n,m}) \vee f;$$

this yields, recalling (5.5),

$$\|u^{n,m}\|_{2,p} \leq c \|A\psi^{n,m}\|_\infty \leq cm^{1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty.$$

Likewise,

$$\|\psi^{n,m}\|_{2,p} \leq cm^{1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty.$$

Applying theorem 4.3, then

$$\|u^{n,m} - u_h^{n,m}\|_\infty \leq cm^{1/2} h^{2-\varepsilon(p)} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty, \quad (5.6)$$

where for shortness we have set : $h^{2-\varepsilon(p)} = h^{2-N/p} |\log h|$.

Step 3 : Inversion of Step 2.

LEMMA 5.3 : *The following estimate holds :*

$$\|u^n - u_h^n\|_\infty \leq ch^{1-\varepsilon(p)} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall n \in \mathbb{N}, \quad \forall p < +\infty. \quad (5.7)$$

Proof : For every choice of index m , we have

$$\|u^n - u_h^n\|_\infty \leq \|u^n - u^{n,m}\|_\infty + \|u^{n,m} - u_h^{n,m}\|_\infty + \|u_h^{n,m} - u_h^n\|_\infty,$$

and, by lemma 4.1 and (5.4), $\forall p$,

$$\|u^n - u^{n,m}\|_\infty \leq cm^{-1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}.$$

Likewise, using lemma 4.2,

$$\|u_h^{n,m} - u_h^n\|_\infty \leq \| \psi_I^{n,m} - \psi_I^n \|_\infty \leq cm^{-1/2} \|\psi^n\|_{1,p};$$

then, from (5.6), we obtain

$$\|u^n - u_h^n\|_\infty \leq c(m^{-1/2} + m^{1/2} h^{2-\varepsilon(p)}) \|\psi^n\|_{1,p}, \quad \forall p < +\infty.$$

If we now choose a suitable m , i.e. such that $1/h^2 \leq m \leq (1/h^2) + 1$, then the proof is complete. ■

Step 4 : Inversion of Step 1.

To complete the proof of theorem 3.2, let us use the same trick of Step 3, obtaining

$$\|u - u_h\|_\infty \leq \|u - u^n\|_\infty + \|u^n - u_h^n\|_\infty + \|u_h^n - u_h\|_\infty;$$

according to (5.3), from (5.7) we get

$$\|u^n - u_h^n\|_\infty \leq cn^{1-\alpha} h^{1-\varepsilon(p)};$$

then, using lemmas 4.1 and 4.2, and (5.2),

$$\|u - u_h\|_\infty \leq c(n^{-\alpha} + n^{1-\alpha} h^{1-\varepsilon(p)});$$

if we now take n such that $1/h \leq n \leq (1/h) + 1$, we finally have

$$\|u - u_h\|_\infty \leq ch^{\alpha-\varepsilon(p)}, \quad \forall p < +\infty,$$

that is the thesis (3.5). ■

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