

Lithostatic-load effects in geologically constrained model building for foothills anisotropic seismic imaging

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Summary

In complex-structure land settings, like a continental rift in Central Africa or a thrust belt in the Andes, seismic data is often affected by low signal-to-noise ratios and subsurface complexity. Under these conditions, the seismic data is far too underconstrained for data-driven seismic methods, so we need as many geologic constraints as possible to constrain the seismic velocity model.

Subsurface rock velocity is a function of lithology, geologic age, and compression due to lithostatic load. Our goal is to isolate the compression effect so that we may focus on the interpretation of the geologic structures and the rock types within the fault blocks. Ideally, our velocity model would be parameterized such that the same lithology of the same age would have the same velocity regardless of the depth of burial, and then, prior to depth migration, we can include a compression factor into the velocity model to account for the lithostatic load that results from depth of burial.

We tested a few parameterization schemes, including weighted averages and multiplicative scalars, and we have examples from a variety of structural-geology settings where different methods apply with varying degrees of success. Generally, we find that parameterizing the compression function as a multiplicative scalar is the most effective method for incorporating compressive effects into a geologic velocity model. Data examples include the foothills of the Rockies, Andes, and Zagros mountains.

Introduction

Seismic imaging in thrust-belt environments benefits significantly from geological input to velocities used for depth imaging. With low fold in the near surface, low signal-to-noise ratios, and complex horizon geometries, automated velocity-model-building tools fail to produce an optimum velocity model for TTI anisotropic depth imaging in these areas. In a setting with such under-constrained seismic velocities, geologic constraints are crucial in the interpretation of our velocity model.

The interpretive, geologically constrained approach to depth migration for these noisy data areas has developed over decades (e.g., Schmid et al., 1996; Wu et al., 1996, Vestrum

and Muenzer, 1997; Isaac and Lawton, 1999; Vestrum et al., 1999; Kirthland Grech et al., 2003; Newrick and Lawton, 2005; Vestrum, 2014). The principle is simple: any update to the velocity model must have a geological justification. For example, if the depth-imaging practitioner observes high velocity in a certain zone in the subsurface, then he or she would identify a geologic reason for increasing the velocity before updating the model. The explanation may be as simple as lithostatic compression causing the velocity of a rock unit to be higher at depth, or the depth imager may need to consult with the structural geologist to determine the likelihood of a structural change to the velocity model that would add higher-velocity lithology above a major fault. The factor that we focus on for this study is the dependence of velocity on depth of burial or lithostatic load.

If we can separate out the effect of lithostatic load on the depth-imaging velocity model, we can simplify the model-building process in addition to creating models that are both more consistent and more accurate.

Theory and Method

Hooke's Law tells us that the force needed to compress a spring increases linearly with the amount of compression, so it logically holds that rocks under increased pressure would be less compressible. Since early studies in seismic velocity effects (e.g., Faust, 1950), geoscientists have observed that seismic velocity increases with an increase in confining pressure. Depth-imaging practitioners understand this phenomenon from both a theoretical perspective and from experience building velocity models for depth migration. It is second nature to incorporate a depth dependency of the seismic velocities.

The objective here is to separate out the compression effect and build velocity models that depend only on lithology and geologic age in the context of the structural model. If we can separate out the compression effect, we may simplify the model-building process by using one velocity function for a given lithologic unit, regardless of the depth of burial. The models become simplified, and the models also become more consistent. If we expect minimal stratigraphic changes across an exploration block, then we can build models with consistent velocities in each rock unit across the modelling

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area, which has an application for building a consistent 3D model across a grid of 2D seismic data (Vestrum et al, 2015).

The first attempt at separating out the compressional component used a weighted average of the lithologic model and the compressional model. We successfully applied this technique on a 3D survey the Zagros Foothills (Vestrum, 2014) and a 2D project in the Peruvian Andes (Vestrum et al, 2015). It worked well in those two specific cases, but that approach broke down in cases with significant lateral velocity variation in the near surface, because the averaging would bias high velocities down or low velocities up. (It is a mystery to these authors how we did not see that problem coming.)

To extend the method to areas with dramatic lateral-velocity variation, we decided to parameterize the compression factor with a compression multiplier. Following a concave-down pattern from Faust (1951), shown in Figure 1, we chose a function that we could parameterize the scalar, s , in terms of a minimum scalar, m , and a depth factor, d , as follows:

$$s = (1-m) \frac{2}{\pi} \arctan\left[\frac{x}{d}\right]. \quad (1)$$

Figure 2 shows the velocity scaling function with values $m=0.6$ and $d=1000$. The depth factor gives the depth at which the scaling factor is halfway between the minimum scaling function, m , and 1, which is the asymptote for the scaling function.

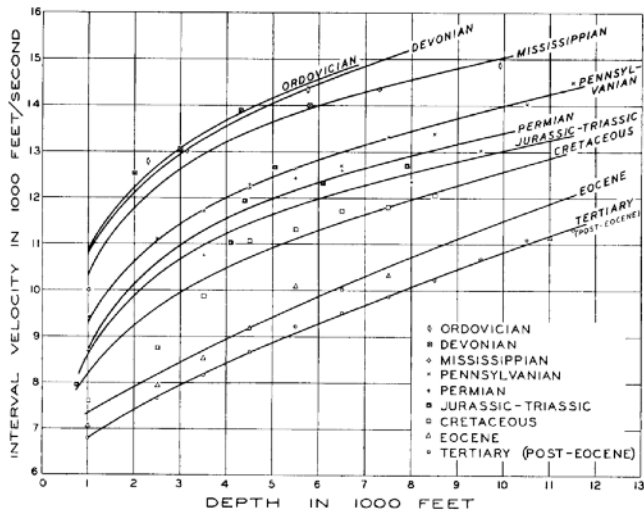


Figure 1: Seismic velocity as a function of depth and geologic age (from Faust, 1951)

Rocks become more resistant to compression as they are under greater pressure as pore spaces decrease in size and

fractures close under increasing pressure. Observations of rock samples under pressure (e.g., He and Schmitt, 2006; Schijn et al., 2010) show that compressional velocities change rapidly at low pressures and stabilize at higher pressure.

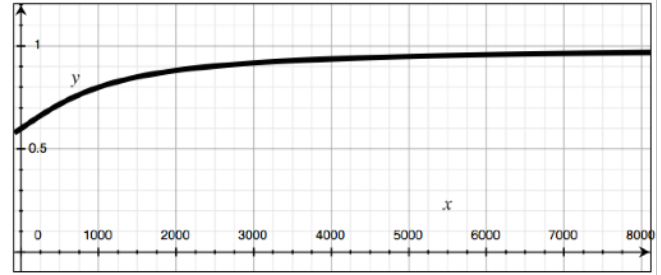


Figure 2: Compression scaling function using Equation 1 for $m=0.6$ and $d=1000$

Example

We apply the scaling to the velocity model for anisotropic depth migration of a Canadian Foothills dataset (Wu et al., 1996). Figure 3a shows the lithologic velocity model based on a structural interpretation and relative velocities for the various rock formations. After we apply the lithostatic-load scalar (Equation 1), using $m=0.9$ and $d=1000$, the velocities decrease towards the top of the section (Figure 3b). Note that the velocity scalar is applied from the topographic surface.

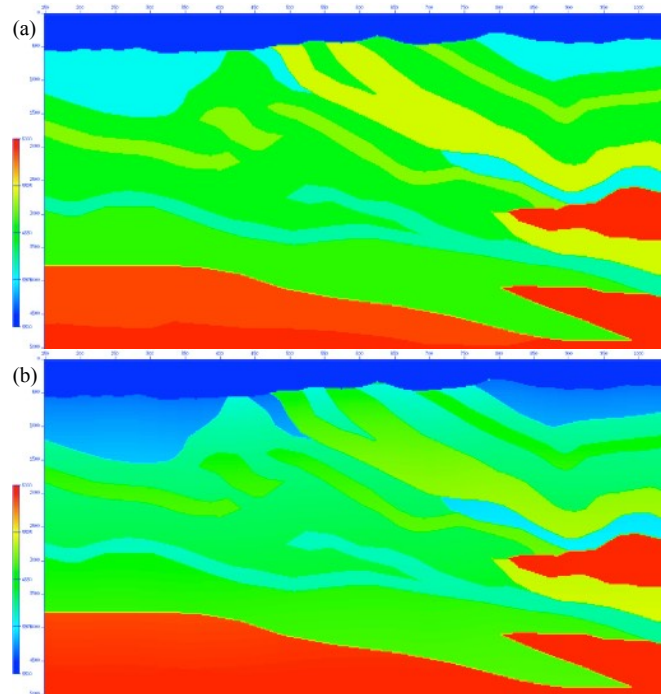


Figure 3: Foothills velocity model with (a) velocity as a function of lithology and (b) velocity as a function of lithology and compression

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The resulting migration from these two velocity models are shown in Figure 4. There are differences in both seismic coherency and depth to the seismic reflectors. The differences in imaging between the two migrations are subtle, so Figure 5 shows a scaled-up view of the seismic images for better comparison.

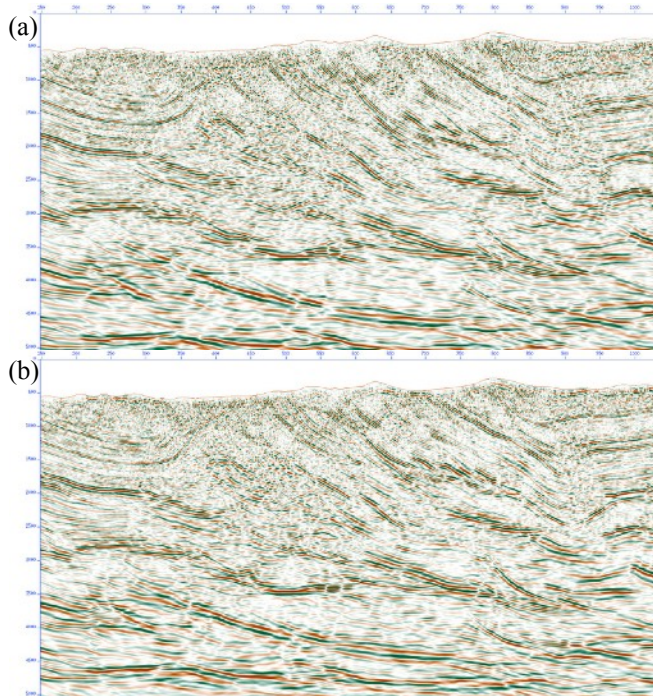


Figure 4: Foothills depth image (a) migrated with the lithologic velocity model from Figure 3a and (b) migrated with the lithologic velocity model from Figure 3b.

Note on the scaled-up views in Figure 5a and Figure 5b that the fold on the top of the thrust imbricate in the centre is more clearly imaged on the migration with the lithostatic load correction in the model (Figure 5b). Each image shows reflectivity from the imbricate, but the curvature of the fold over top of the structure has a more geologically reasonable shape on Figure 5b compared to the crossing events near the top of the imaged imbricate on Figure 5a. Even though the improvement in seismic imaging is subtle, the improved coherency indicates that the velocity model used for the migration is a more accurate representation of the subsurface velocity structure.

Conclusions

By separating out the effect of compression using a scaling function, we are able to create more lithologically consistent velocity models for depth migration. With a separate

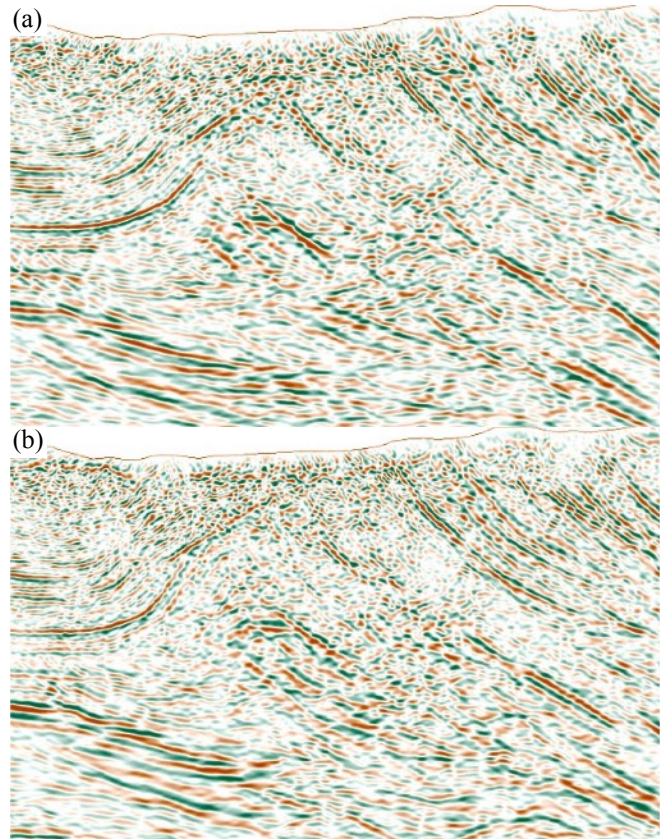


Figure 5: Scaled up view of a thrust imbricate on the seismic section displayed in Figure 4.

compression factor, the depth-imaging practitioner can focus on defining the lithologic velocities for the rock layers and the fold and fault structures. The benefits are consistency in the velocities and efficiency in the model-building process.

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