Acta Astronautica 108 (2015) 57–61

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Acta Astronautica

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/actaastro

Estimate of sizes of small asteroids (cosmic bodies) by the method of stroboscopic radiolocation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 October 2014
Accepted 8 December 2014
Available online 16 December 2014

Keywords:
Near-Earth objects
Asteroids
Radar observations
Stroboscopic measurements

ABSTRACT

Radiolocation methods of probing minor celestial bodies (asteroids) by the nanosecond pulses can be used for monitoring of near-Earth space with the purpose of identification of hazardous cosmic objects able to impact the Earth.

Development of the methods that allow us to improve the accuracy of determining the asteroids size (i.e. whether it measures tens or hundreds meters in diameter) is important for correctly estimating the degree of damage which they can cause (either regional or global catastrophes, respectively). In this paper we suggest a novel method of estimating the sizes of the passive cosmic objects using the radiolocation probing by ultra-high-resolution nanosecond signals to obtain radar signatures. The modulation envelope of the reflected signal, which is a radar portrait of the cosmic object, is subjected to time scale transformation to carrier Doppler frequency by means of radioimpulse strobing. The shift of a strobe within the probing period will be performed by radial motion of the object which will allow us to forgo the special autoshift circuit used in the oscillographic technical equipment.

The measured values of duration of radiolocation portrait can be used to estimate the mean radius of the object by using the average spatial length of the portrait. The method makes it possible to appraise the sizes of cosmic objects through their radiolocation portrait duration, with accuracy that is independent of the objects range.

1. Introduction

Radiolocation methods of probing of passive cosmic objects (large meteors and asteroids) can be used for surveying the near-Earth space for the purpose of recognition of objects that present danger upon impact with the Earth.

It is known that cosmic objects smaller than 10 m in size do not reach Earths surface, burning up in the atmosphere [1], and thus are not dangerous for the planets population. The bodies that are tens meters across are able to explode and cause serious destruction, while the objects with a size of hundreds meters in extent and larger would lead to a regional or global disaster. With that, the bodies ranging specifically from 70 to 200 m in diameter present the maximum danger for the humanity in its characteristic timescale, since they have greater probability of impacting the Earth than the larger bodies and their average destructive effect is maximal (NASA NEO STD Report [2,3]). Thus the questions of improving accuracy for estimating sizes of cosmic bodies crossing the Earths orbit are relevant even at present and the interest in them will only increase.

The shortcomings of the optical methods for measurement of linear dimensions of celestial bodies are that error increases proportionally with distance to the measured object. The reason for that is that the optical systems of measurement

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.actaastro.2014.12.006
0094-5765/

are actually angular observations, and consequently the errors in angle measurement result in errors of estimating diameters proportional to the monitored objects distance. Besides, all optical means of ground-based observation are subject to errors due to atmospheric opacity and turbulence. Radar probing methods are free from the aforementioned drawbacks, their resolution is determined by the properties of the signals used and does not depend on distance.

The location of the radar systems is suggested at the geostationary orbit for the permanent monitoring of potentially dangerous directions. The advantage of this location is the absence of atmosphere noise which enhances the likelihood of detection of hazardous objects.

2. Radiolocation portrait of an asteroid

The longitudinal asteroids dimension (10–100 m) is determined by the radar signature duration with the use of ultrashort ($\sim$3 ns) RF pulses providing range resolution $\sim$0.5 m.

The radar systems using the traditional narrow-band long-duration signals do not enable us to estimate the linear dimensions of the cosmic objects with the desired precision due to insufficient resolution. For the foregoing purposes one needs probing by high-resolution signals. In radiolocation the signals with large absolute width of spectrum Δf are defined as high-resolution ones if they have high distance resolving power $\Delta r \approx 2c/\Delta f \ll L$ where c is the speed of light and L is the characteristic dimensions of the object reflecting signal [4]. At that, the value $c\tau_u$, where τ_u is the signal duration, has the meaning of the spatial length of the signal. These signals produce the radiolocation portrait of the object, that is, the response $x(t)$ to high-resolution signal $x_0(t)$ that is governed by the radial dimension ΔR of the illuminated side of the object (Fig. 1).

The radiolocation portrait represents a target echo signal upon the condition of "superresolution" when the radar's distance resolution Δr is much less than the linear dimensions of the target. The process of transformation of the probing signal $x_0(t)$ to the reflected one $x(t)$ can be described by the integral

$$x(t) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} x_0(t')h(t-t')\,dt' \tag{1}$$

with the kernel as the aggregate of "bright points", that is, the local surface patches of reflection [5]

$$h(t) = \sum_i h_i \delta(t - 2r_i/c), \tag{2}$$

where h_i is the intensity of reflection from the bright points composing the radiolocation portrait, r_i are the locations of these points on the object.

The individual character of radiolocation portraits allows us to use them for solving the pattern-recognition problem.

For the radial size $\sim$10 m one has to ensure the distance resolution $\delta r \sim 0.5$ m (by comparison, the best resolution achieved at modern ground-based astronomical radars Goldstone and Aresibo is $\sim$4 m [6]) which corresponds to the duration of probing radar signal pulse $\sim$3.5 ns.

Registration and processing of these signals are a matter of considerable difficulties due to the broad band of frequencies they occupy. Nevertheless, the periodic character of the signal permits the use of the stroboscopic effect in radio engineering, emerging upon strobing of the signals by a sequence of window functions with closely spaced repetition frequency. The procedure for the microwave signals can be realized in a balanced mixer when a pulse signal of a heterodyne repeating the probing signal is injecting to the reference channel.

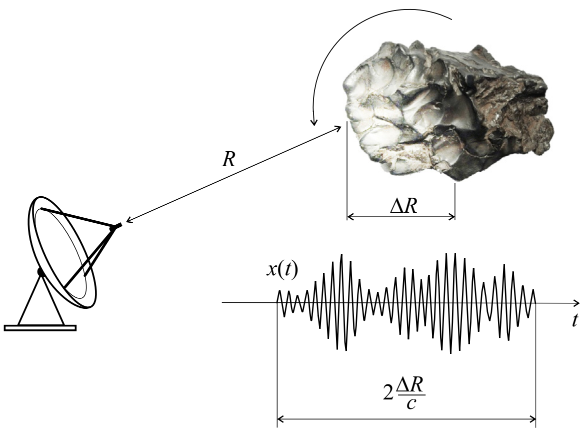

Fig. 1. The radar portrait-forming network.

3. Stroboscopic transformation of reflected signals

Processing of reflected back ultrashort radio signals with wide frequency band can be achieved by periodic repetition of the probing signal followed by stroboscopic transformation of the reflected signals time scale by 10^3–10^5 times.

Advantages of this method for our application are as follows: bulk of amplification comes in a narrow frequency band (few kHz), that significantly simplifies the RF chain of receiver; the intermediate frequency (frequency shift between the carriers of probing and reflected signals) is formed naturally by the Doppler shift Ω when asteroid is moving towards the radar; this simplifies the receiver's hardware design (no need for additional high-frequency generator). Here $\Omega = 2V_r/c\omega_0$, where ω_0 is the carrier frequency of probing signal, V_r is the radial velocity of the asteroid; no need to create auto-shift of RF pulse necessary for stroboscopic transformation because the required shift ΔT is formed due to relative motion of the asteroid and the radar. Here $\Delta T = 2V_r/cT$, where T is the probing period; the transformed narrow-band signal can be transmitted to the base station for processing and analysis, if necessary.

The model of stroboscopic transformer which consists of a mixer multiplying the analyzed, $x(t)$, and the strobing $a(t)$ signals, and the low-pass filter (LPF) is presented in Fig. 2.

Fig. 3 illustrates the principle of stroboscopic transformation where

$$x(t) = \sum_{k=0}^{N} x_0(t - kT_1), \quad a(t) = \sum_{k=0}^{N} a_0(t - kT_2) \tag{3}$$