Antenna Basics

Introduction

Antennas are a very important component of communication systems. By definition, an antenna is a device used to transform an RF signal, traveling on a conductor, into an electromagnetic wave in free space. Antennas demonstrate a property known as *reciprocity*, which means that an antenna will maintain the same characteristics regardless if it is transmitting or receiving. Most antennas are resonant devices, which operate efficiently over a relatively narrow frequency band. An antenna must be tuned to the same frequency band of the radio system to which it is connected, otherwise the reception and the transmission will be impaired. When a signal is fed into an antenna, the antenna will emit radiation distributed in space in a certain way. A graphical representation of the relative distribution of the radiated power in space is called a *radiation pattern*.

Antenna Glossary

Before we talk about specific antennas, there are a few common terms that must be defined and explained:

- Input Impedance

For an efficient transfer of energy, the impedance of the radio, of the antenna and of the transmission cable connecting them must be the same. Transceivers and their transmission lines are typically designed for 50Ω impedance. If the antenna has an impedance different from 50Ω, then there is a mismatch and an impedance matching circuit is required.

- Return loss

The return loss is another way of expressing mismatch. It is a logarithmic ratio measured in dB that compares the power reflected by the antenna to the power that is fed into the antenna from the transmission line. The relationship between SWR and return loss is the following:

$$\text{Return Loss (in dB)} = 20\log_{10}\frac{\text{SWR}}{\text{SWR}-1}$$

- Bandwidth

The bandwidth of an antenna refers to the range of frequencies over which the antenna can operate correctly. The antenna's bandwidth is the number of Hz for which the antenna will exhibit an SWR less than 2:1.

The bandwidth can also be described in terms of percentage of the center frequency of the band.

$$\text{BW} = 100 \times \frac{F_H - F_L}{F_C}$$

where F_H is the highest frequency in the band, F_L is the lowest frequency in the band, and F_C is the center frequency in the band.

In this way, bandwidth is constant relative to frequency. If bandwidth was expressed in absolute units of frequency, it would be different depending upon the center frequency. Different types of antennas have different bandwidth limitations.

- Directivity and Gain

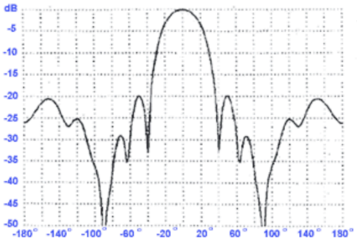
Directivity is the ability of an antenna to focus energy in a particular direction when transmitting, or to receive energy better from a particular direction when receiving. In a static situation, it is possible to use the antenna directivity to concentrate the radiation beam in the wanted direction. However in a dynamic system where the transceiver is not fixed, the antenna should radiate equally in all directions, and this is known as an omni-directional antenna.

Gain is not a quantity which can be defined in terms of a physical quantity such as the Watt or the Ohm, but it is a dimensionless ratio. Gain is given in reference to a standard antenna. The two most common reference antennas are the isotropic antenna and the resonant half-wave dipole antenna. The isotropic antenna radiates equally well in all directions. Real isotropic antennas do not exist, but they provide useful and simple theoretical antenna patterns with which to compare real antennas. Any real antenna will radiate more energy in some directions than in others. Since it cannot create energy, the total power radiated is the same as an isotropic antenna, so in other directions it must radiate less energy. The gain of an antenna in a given direction is the amount of energy radiated in that direction compared to the energy an isotropic antenna would radiate in the same direction when driven with the same input power. Usually we are only interested in the maximum gain, which is the gain in the direction in which the antenna is radiating most of the power. An antenna gain of 3 dB compared to an isotropic antenna would be written as 3 dBi. The resonant half-wave dipole can be a useful standard for comparing to other antennas at one frequency or over a very narrow band of frequencies. To compare the dipole to an antenna over a range of frequencies requires a number of dipoles of different lengths. An antenna gain of 3 dB compared to a dipole antenna would be written as 3 dBd.

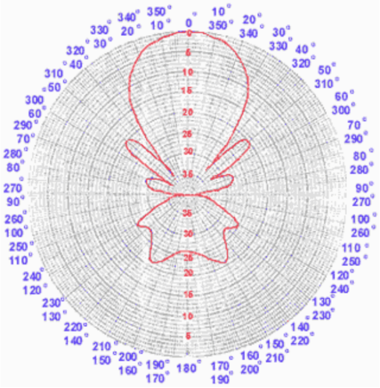
The method of measuring gain by comparing the antenna under test against a known standard antenna, which has a calibrated gain, is technically known as a gain transfer technique. Another method for measuring gain is the 3 antennas method., where the transmitted and received power at the antenna terminals is measured between three arbitrary antennas at a known fixed distance.

- Radiation Pattern

The radiation or antenna pattern describes the relative strength of the radiated field in various directions from the antenna, at a constant distance. The radiation pattern is a reception pattern as well, since it also describes the receiving properties of the antenna. The radiation pattern is three-dimensional, but usually the measured radiation patterns are a two-dimensional slice of the three-dimensional pattern, in the horizontal or vertical planes. These pattern measurements are presented in either a *rectangular* or a *polar* format. The following figure shows a rectangular plot presentation of a typical 10 element Yagi. The detail is good but it is difficult to visualize the antenna behavior at different directions.

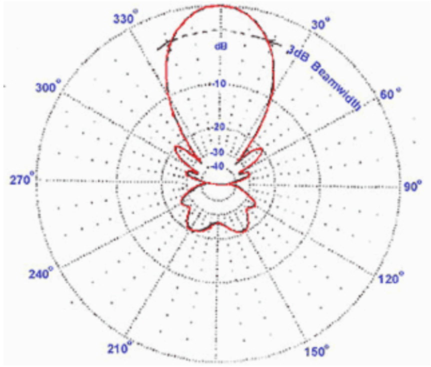


Polar coordinate systems are used almost universally. In the polar-coordinate graph, points are located by projection along a rotating axis (radius) to an intersection with one of several concentric circles. Following is a polar plot of the same 10 element Yagi antenna.



Polar coordinate systems may be divided generally in two classes: *linear* and *logarithmic*. In the linear coordinate system, the concentric circles are equally spaced, and are graduated. Such a grid may be used to prepare a linear plot of the power contained in the signal. For ease of comparison, the equally spaced concentric circles may be replaced with appropriately placed circles representing the decibel response, referenced to 0 dB at the outer edge of the plot. In this kind of plot the minor lobes are suppressed. Lobes with peaks more than 15 dB or so below the main lobe disappear because of their small size. This grid enhances plots in which the antenna has a high directivity and small minor lobes. The voltage of the signal, rather than the power, can also be plotted on a linear coordinate system. In this case, too, the directivity is enhanced and the minor lobes suppressed, but not in the same degree as in the linear power grid.

In the logarithmic polar coordinate system the concentric grid lines are spaced periodically according to the logarithm of the voltage in the signal. Different values may be used for the logarithmic constant of periodicity, and this choice will have an effect on the appearance of the plotted patterns. Generally the 0 dB reference for the outer edge of the chart is used. With this type of grid, lobes that are 30 or 40 dB below the main lobe are still distinguishable. The spacing between points at 0 dB and at -3 dB is greater than the spacing between -20 dB and -23 dB, which is greater than the spacing between -50 dB and -53 dB. The spacing thus correspond to the relative significance of such changes in antenna performance.



A modified logarithmic scale emphasizes the shape of the major beam while compressing very low-level (>30 dB) sidelobes towards the center of the pattern.

There are two kinds of radiation pattern: absolute and relative. Absolute radiation patterns are presented in absolute units of field strength or power. Relative radiation patterns are referenced in relative units of field strength or power. Most radiation pattern measurements are relative to the isotropic antenna, and then the gain transfer method is then used to establish the absolute gain of the antenna.

The radiation pattern in the region close to the antenna is not the same as the pattern at large distances. The term near-field refers to the field pattern that exists close to the antenna, while the term far-field refers to the field pattern at large distances. The far-field is also called the radiation field, and is what is most commonly of interest. Ordinarily, it is the radiated power that is of interest, and so antenna patterns are usually measured in the far-field region. For pattern measurement it is important to choose a distance sufficiently large to be in the far-field, well out of the near-field. The minimum permissible distance depends on the dimensions of the antenna in relation to the wavelength. The accepted formula for this distance is:

$$r_{min} = \frac{2d^2}{\lambda}$$

where r_{min} is the minimum distance from the antenna, d is the largest dimension of the antenna, and λ is the wavelength.

- **Beamwidth**

An antenna's beamwidth is usually understood to mean the half-power beamwidth. The peak radiation intensity is found and then the points on either side of the peak which represent half the power of the peak intensity are located. The angular distance between the half power points is defined as the beamwidth. Half the power expressed in decibels is —3dB, so the half power beamwidth is sometimes referred to as the 3dB beamwidth. Both horizontal and vertical beamwidths are usually considered.

Assuming that most of the radiated power is not divided into sidelobes, then the directive gain is inversely proportional to the beamwidth: as the beamwidth decreases, the directive gain increases.

-**Sidelobes**

No antenna is able to radiate all the energy in one preferred direction. Some is inevitably radiated in other directions. The peaks are referred to as sidelobes, commonly specified in *dB down from the main lobe*.

- **Nulls**

In an antenna radiation pattern, a *null* is a zone in which the effective radiated power is at a minimum. A null often has a narrow directivity angle compared to that of the main beam. Thus, the null is useful for several purposes, such as suppression of interfering signals in a given direction.

- Polarization

Polarization is defined as the orientation of the electric field of an electromagnetic wave. Polarization is in general described by an ellipse. Two special cases of elliptical polarization are linear polarization and circular polarization. The initial polarization of a radio wave is determined by the antenna.

With linear polarization the electric field vector stays in the same plane all the time. Vertically polarized radiation is somewhat less affected by reflections over the transmission path. Omnidirectional antennas always have vertical polarization. With horizontal polarization, such reflections cause variations in received signal strength. Horizontal antennas are less likely to pick up man-made interference, which ordinarily is vertically polarized.

In circular polarization the electric field vector appears to be rotating with circular motion about the direction of propagation, making one full turn for each RF cycle. This rotation may be righthand or lefthand. Choice of polarization is one of the design choices available to the RF system designer.

- Polarization Mismatch

In order to transfer maximum power between a transmit and a receive antenna, both antennas must have the same spatial orientation, the same polarization sense and the same axial ratio.

When the antennas are not aligned or do not have the same polarization, there will be a reduction in power transfer between the two antennas. This reduction in power transfer will reduce the overall system efficiency and performance.

When the transmit and receive antennas are both linearly polarized, physical antenna misalignment will result in a polarization mismatch loss which can be determined using the following formula:

$$\text{Polarization Mismatch Loss (dB)} = 20 \log (\cos \vartheta)$$

where ϑ is the misalignment angle between the two antennas. For 15° we have a loss of 0.3 dB, for 30° we have 1.25 dB, for 45° we have 3 dB and for 90° we have an infinite loss.

The actual mismatch loss between a circularly polarized antenna and a linearly polarized antenna will vary depending upon the axial ratio of the circularly polarized antenna.

If polarizations are coincident no attenuation occurs due to coupling mismatch between field and antenna, while if they are not, then the communication can't even take place.

- **Front-to-back ratio**

It is useful to know the *front-to-back ratio* that is the ratio of the maximum directivity of an antenna to its directivity in the rearward direction. For example, when the principal plane pattern is plotted on a relative dB scale, the front-to-back ratio is the difference in dB between the level of the maximum radiation, and the level of radiation in a direction 180 degrees.

Types of Antennas

A classification of antennas can be based on:

- **Frequency and size**

antennas used for HF are different from the ones used for VHF, which in turn are different from antennas for microwave. The wavelength is different at different frequencies, so the antennas must be different in size to radiate signals at the correct wavelength. We are particularly interested in antennas working in the microwave range, especially in the 2.4 GHz and 5 GHz frequencies. At 2.4 GHz the wavelength is 12.5 cm, while at 5 Ghz it is 6 cm.

- Directivity

antennas can be omnidirectional, sectorial or directive. Omnidirectional antennas radiate the same pattern all around the antenna in a complete 360 degrees pattern. The most popular types of omnidirectional antennas are the Dipole-Type and the Ground Plane. Sectorial antennas radiate primarily in a specific area. The beam can be as wide as 180 degrees, or as narrow as 60 degrees. Directive antennas are antennas in which the beamwidth is much narrower than in sectorial antennas. They have the highest gain and are therefore used for long distance links. Types of directive antennas are the Yagi, the biquad, the horn, the helicoidal, the patch antenna, the Parabolic Dish and many others.

- Physical construction

antennas can be constructed in many different ways, ranging from simple wires to parabolic dishes, up to coffee cans.

When considering antennas suitable for 2.4 GHz WLAN use, another classification can be used:

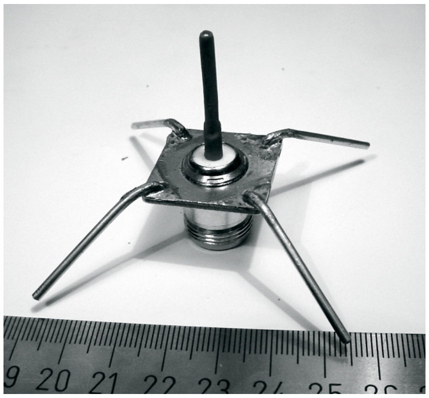
- Application

we identify two application categories which are Base Station and Point-to-Point. Each of these suggests different types of antennas for their purpose. Base Stations are used for multipoint access. Two choices are Omni antennas which radiate equally in all directions, or Sectorial antennas, which focus into a small area. In the Point-to-Point case, antennas are used to connect two single locations together. Directive antennas are the primary choice for this application.

A brief list of common type of antennas for the 2.4 GHz frequency is presented now, with a short description and basic information about their characteristics.

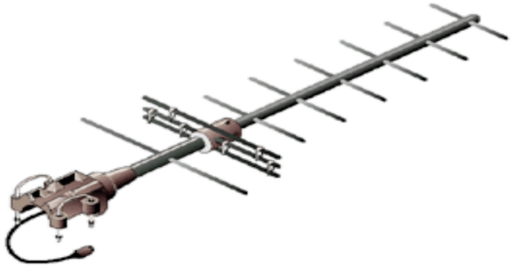
1/4 Wavelength Ground Plane

The 1⁄4 Wavelength Ground Plane antenna is very simple in its construction and is useful for communications when size, cost and ease of construction are important. This antenna is designed to transmit a vertically polarized signal. It consists of a 1⁄4 wave element as half-dipole and three or four 1⁄4 wavelength ground elements bent 30 to 45 degrees down. This set of elements, called *radials*, is known as a *ground plane*. This is a simple and effective antenna that can capture a signal equally from all directions. To increase the gain, however, the signal can be flattened out to take away focus from directly above and below, and providing more focus on the horizon. The vertical beamwidth represents the degree of flatness in the focus. This is useful in a Point-to-Multipoint situation, if all the other antennas are also at the same height. The gain of this antenna is in the order of 2 - 4 dBi.



Yagi antenna

A basic Yagi consists of a certain number of straight elements, each measuring approximately half wavelength. The driven or active element of a Yagi is the equivalent of a center-fed, half-wave dipole antenna. Parallel to the driven element, and approximately 0.2 to 0.5 wavelength on either side of it, are straight rods or wires called reflectors and directors, or passive elements altogether. A reflector is placed behind the driven element and is slightly longer than half wavelength; a director is placed in front of the driven element and is slightly shorter than half wavelength. A typical Yagi has one reflector and one or more directors. The antenna propagates electromagnetic field energy in the direction running from the driven element toward the directors, and is most sensitive to incoming electromagnetic field energy in this same direction. The more directors a Yagi has, the greater the gain. As more directors are added to a Yagi, however, it becomes longer. Following is the photo of a Yagi antenna with 6 directors and one reflector.



Yagi antennas are used primarily for Point-to-Point links, have a gain from 10 to 20 dBi and a horizontal beamwidth of 10 to 20 degrees.

Horn

The horn antenna derives its name from the characteristic flared appearance. The flared portion can be square, rectangular, cylindrical or conical. The direction of maximum radiation corresponds with the axis of the horn. It is easily fed with a waveguide, but can be fed with a coaxial cable and a proper transition. Horn antennas are commonly used as the active element in a dish antenna. The horn is pointed toward the center of the dish reflector. The use of a horn, rather than a dipole antenna or any other type of antenna, at the focal point of the dish minimizes loss of energy around the edges of the dish reflector. At 2.4 GHz, a simple horn antenna made with a tin can has a gain in the order of 10 - 15 dBi.

Parabolic Dish

Antennas based on parabolic reflectors are the most common type of directive antennas when a high gain is required. The main advantage is that they can be made to have gain and directivity as large as required. The main disadvantage is that big dishes are difficult to mount and are likely to have a large windage.

The basic property of a perfect parabolic reflector is that it converts a spherical wave irradiating from a point source placed at the focus into a plane wave. Conversely, all the energy received by the dish from a distant source is reflected to a single point at the focus of the dish. The position of the focus, or focal length, is given by:

$$f = \frac{D^2}{16 \times c}$$

where D is the dish diameter and c is the depth of the parabola at its center.

The size of the dish is the most important factor since it determines the maximum gain that can be achieved at the given frequency and the resulting beamwidth. The gain and beamwidth obtained are given by:

$$G = \frac{(\pi \times D)^2}{\lambda^2} \times n$$

$$BW = \frac{70\lambda}{D}$$

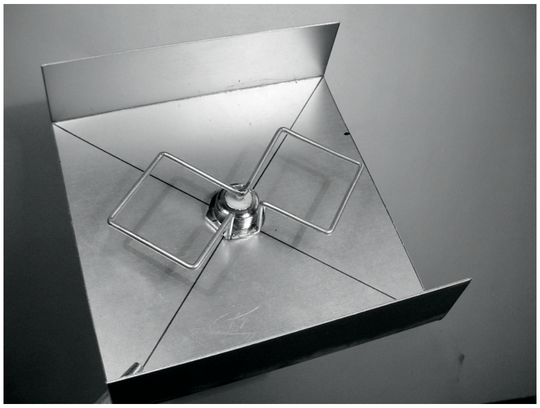
where D is the dish diameter and n is the efficiency. The efficiency is determined mainly by the effectiveness of illumination of the dish by the feed, but also by other factors. Each time the diameter of a dish is doubled, the gain is four times, or 6 dB, greater. If both stations double the size of their dishes, signal strength can be increased of 12 dB, a very substantial gain. An efficiency of 50% can be assumed when hand-building the antenna.

The ratio f/D (focal length/diameter of the dish) is the fundamental factor governing the design of the feed for a dish. The ratio is directly related to the beamwidth of the feed necessary to illuminate the dish effectively. Two dishes of the same diameter but different focal lengths require different design of feed if both are to be illuminated efficiently. The value of 0.25 corresponds to the common focal-plane dish in which the focus is in the same plane as the rim of the dish.

Dishes up to one meter are usually made from solid material. Aluminum is frequently used for its weight advantage, its durability and good electrical characteristics. Windage increases rapidly with dish size and soon becomes a severe problem. Dishes which have a reflecting surface that uses an open mesh are frequently used. These have a poorer front-to-back ratio, but are safer to use and easier to build. Copper, aluminum, brass, galvanized steel and iron are suitable mesh materials.

BiQuad

The BiQuad antenna is simple to build and offers good directivity and gain for Point-to-Point communications. It consists of a two squares of the same size of 1⁄4 wavelength as a radiating element and of a metallic plate or grid as reflector. This antenna has a beamwidth of about 70 degrees and a gain in the order of 10-12 dBi. It can be used as stand-alone antenna or as feeder for a Parabolic Dish. The polarization is such that looking at the antenna from the front, if the squares are placed side by side the polarization is vertical.



Other Antennas

Many other types of antennas exist and new ones are created following the advances in technology.

Sector or Sectorial antennas: they are widely used in cellular telephony infrastructure and are usually built adding a reflective plate to one or more phased dipoles. Their horizontal beamwidth can be as wide as 180 degrees, or as narrow as 60 degrees, while the vertical is usually much narrower. Composite antennas can be built with many Sectors to cover a wider horizontal range (*multisectorial antenna*).

Panel or Patch antennas: they are solid flat panels used for indoor coverage, with a gain up to 20 dB.