

The Three-Phase Induction Motor

A Technical Description

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English 21007 - Writing for Engineers

City College of New York
Spring 2026

February 18, 2026

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I. Introduction

Many machines used in daily life rely on electric motors to initiate motion. Common household items such as fans, refrigerators, air conditioners, and washing machines all depend on motors for operation, as do elevators, water pumps, and numerous industrial machines. Although these devices are familiar, the process by which electrical energy is converted into physical movement is not immediately apparent. Electricity itself is invisible, yet it produces controlled, continuous motion that powers much of modern society.

One of the most notable devices responsible for this conversion is the induction motor. An induction motor, you may ask? This is a type of electric motor that produces motion without directly requiring electrical connections to its moving parts. Instead, it relies on magnetic fields created by electrical currents. A magnetic field is an invisible area of force surrounding a magnet or an electrical current. From this invisible field, a strategically placed magnet can feel an attraction to or repulsion from this region. These magnetic fields rotate in a precise and controlled manner, which causes the motor's internal components to move. The major structural elements that allow this interaction occur mostly in the stator and rotor, which can be observed in the cross-sectional view shown in Figure 1. This is a visual representation that highlights the stationary outer structure and rotating inner component that work together to produce mechanical motion.

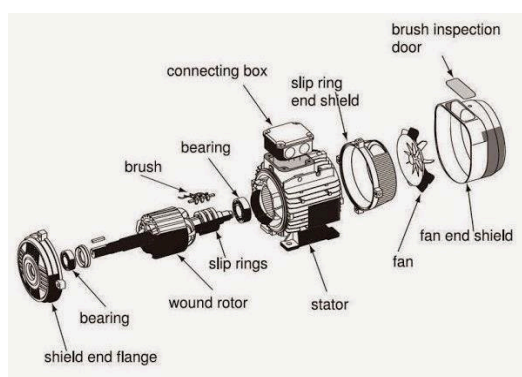


Figure 1. Cross-sectional view of a three-phase induction motor showing the stator and rotor.

The discovery and foundation of this technology were developed in the late nineteenth century, during a period when engineers were experimenting with the potential of electrical power. The most notable of them was the renowned Nikola Tesla, who was the inventor of the first induction motor, known as the polyphase induction motor. As alternating current (AC) systems became more common, there was a substantial spike in the need for reliable motors that could efficiently work on this kind of electricity. This ingenious discovery—that multiple alternating currents, properly timed, could produce a functioning rotating magnetic field essentially became a breakthrough. It was this discovery that helped engineers and scientists come up with a device that could use these magnetic fields, hence the induction motor.

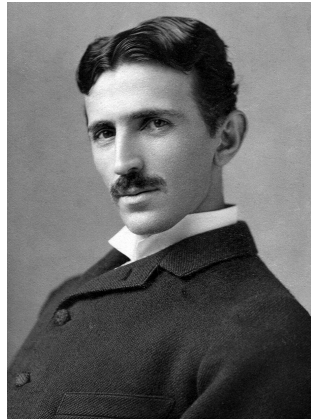


Figure 2. Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), pioneer of the polyphase induction motor.

Today, induction motors are used in electrical motors around the world. Their reliability, efficiency, and relatively simple design make them ideal for a wide variety of applications. From household devices to large industrial machines and systems. The key to being able to understand how rotating magnetic fields create motion within an induction motor provides insight into one of the most vital mechanisms underlying electrical technology. This paper will firstly familiarize you with the basic principles of magnetism and alternating current, then we'll dive into the construction of an induction motor, and finally, we'll examine how a rotating magnetic field produces mechanical motion. Let's get into it, shall we?

II. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

A. Alternating Current

Electrical current refers to the movement of tiny charged particles, named electrons, through a material such as copper wire. When these electrons move, their electrical energy is transferred from one place to another. There are two main ways this movement can happen: direct current (DC) and alternating current (AC).

Direct current refers to a current that flows in only one general direction. It is similar to water and how water flows steadily through a pipe from one end to the other without a change of

direction. Batteries are a common source of direct current because they maintain a constant flow of charge. This consistent direction of flow means that one end of the battery remains positively charged while the other remains negatively charged. This separation is referred to as polarity. In direct current systems, this polarity mainly remains constant over time.

Alternating current behaves quite differently, which, in doing so, introduces a spectrum of new phenomena. Instead of flowing in one direction, it repeatedly reverses direction in a regular and repeating fashion. As the current changes direction, the polarity reverses. This means that the positive and negative ends are continuously switching places. Rather than maintaining a fixed positive and negative side, the system alternates between them, hence the name alternating current.

The difference between these two types of currents can be more clearly understood by examining their graphical representations, as shown in Figure 3.

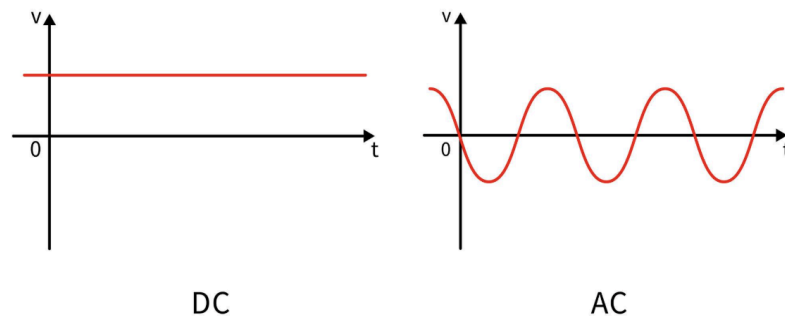


Figure 3. Comparison of direct current (DC) and alternating current (AC) waveforms. Direct current remains constant over time, while alternating current varies in a sinusoidal pattern and periodically reverses polarity.

This repeated back-and-forth motion happens in quick succession. In the United States, this reversal occurs sixty times per second. Each complete back-and-forth movement is called a cycle, and the number of cycles per second is known as the frequency, which is denoted in Hertz (Hz). So, expressing a frequency of sixty cycles per second is written as 60 Hertz (60 Hz).

As a consequence of this repeated alternation, it creates a smooth wave-like pattern that, when visualized on a graph, flows up and down, and is called a sinusoidal waveform. The magnitude of the current, meaning how strong it is, continuously increases and decreases over time. A concept that comes from this, as both the direction and magnitude of the current constantly change, is a time-varying current.

This time-varying behavior is crucial to the operation of an induction motor. A steady current with constant polarity, like a battery, would produce a steady magnetic field. However, a current that continuously reverses polarity produces a magnetic field that also changes over time. As will be explained in the following section, this changing magnetic field makes it possible to create rotation without a direct electrical connection to the rotating parts of the motor.

B. Magnetism and Magnetic Fields

Magnetism is a physical phenomenon that, put into plain words, produces forces of attraction and repulsion between objects. The most familiar object to put this idea into place is a magnet, such as those that stick to a refrigerator. When two magnets are brought close together, they may either pull toward each other or push away. This peculiar behavior occurs because magnets create an invisible region of influence around them.

This invisible region is called a magnetic field, which can be explained as the area surrounding a magnet or electric current where magnetic forces can be detected. Although the field itself is invisible to the naked eye, its effects can still be observed. For example, take a handful of iron filings and sprinkle them around a magnet, and they arrange themselves in a curved pattern. This pattern that the iron filings take can surprisingly reveal the curved shape of the magnetic field around the magnet. The distribution of magnetic field lines around a simple bar magnet is illustrated in Figure 4.

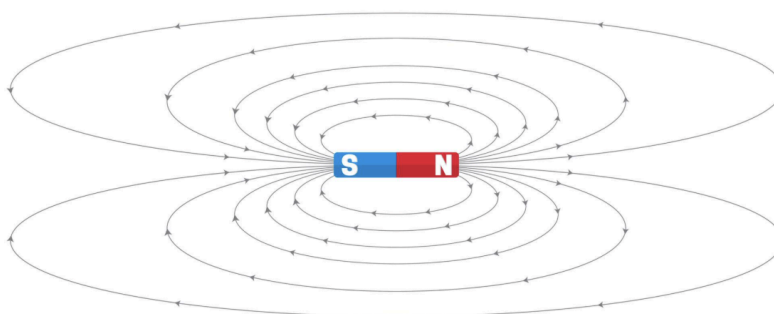


Figure 4. Magnetic field lines surrounding a bar magnet. The lines indicate the direction and shape of the magnetic field between the north and south poles.

Magnets have two ends, known as poles. One end is called the north pole, and the other is called the south pole. This is crucial to understanding magnetism since opposite poles attract one another, while like poles repel. This force of attraction and repulsion occurs because magnetic fields interact with each other.

However, magnetic fields are not produced solely by magnets. A very important discovery in physics showed that an electric current can also create a magnetic field. When an electric charge flows through a wire, a magnetic field forms around that wire. This relationship between electricity and magnetism is one of the fundamental principles of electromagnetism. To put this into a mental image, think about it by visualizing a current flowing through a copper wire; this is called a current-carrying conductor. This forms invisible circular patterns around the wire. The circular magnetic field produced by a current-carrying conductor is shown in Figure 5.

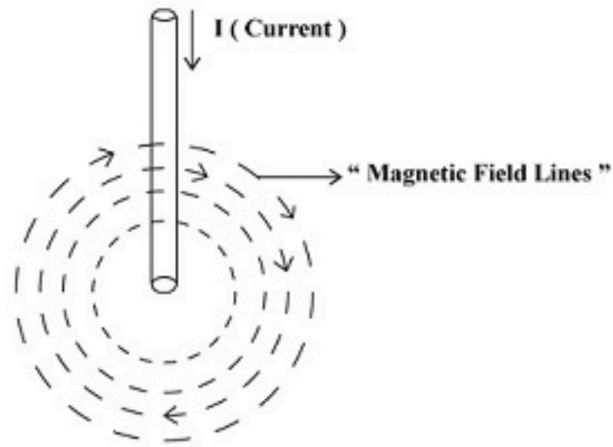


Figure 5. Magnetic field lines surrounding a straight current-carrying conductor. The direction of the field depends on the direction of the current flow.

When the electric current changes, the magnetic field changes as well. If the current increases, the magnetic field becomes stronger and vice versa. If the current reverses direction, the direction of the magnetic field also reverses. Here you can start to see the significance of the relation between electricity and magnetism. This connection between changing current and changing magnetic field is essential to the operation of an induction motor.

As explained in the previous section, alternating current continuously reverses direction and polarity, and because of this, the magnetic field created by this type of current is constantly changing. In the next subsection, it will be shown how carefully arranged coils carrying alternating currents can combine to produce a rotating magnetic field—the key that makes induction motors operate.

C. Three-Phased Systems and Rotating Magnetic Fields

Electric power systems often use more than one alternating current at the same time. Instead of relying on one singular alternating current, engineers often use three separate currents. This is known as the three-phase system.

In a three-phase system, three separate coils each carry their own alternating current. Each current follows a strict repeating wave pattern; however, it reaches its maximum value at different times. Each of these currents is evenly spaced by one-third of a cycle, or in other words, spaced by 120 degrees. This separation in timing is often referred to as a phase difference. The 120-degree phase separation between the three alternating currents is illustrated in Figure 6.

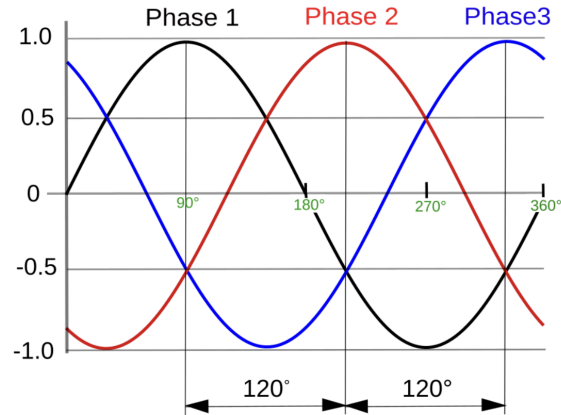


Figure 6. Three alternating currents in a three-phase system, each separated by 120 degrees in phase.

To help you better understand this idea, picture three people standing evenly spaced around a circular platform. If each person pushes on the platform one after the other in a repeating sequence, it begins to rotate smoothly. Although no single person pushes the platform continuously, their timed efforts combine to produce steady motion. In a similar way, three alternating currents that are evenly spaced in time combine to produce a continuous rotational effect. When these phase-shifted currents are applied to coils arranged around a circular structure, they produce a rotating magnetic field, as shown in Figure 7.

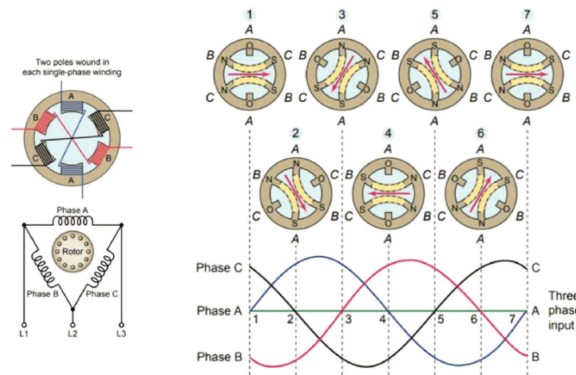


Figure 7. Three stator coils energized by phase-shifted currents combine to produce a rotating magnetic field.

This phenomenon is called the rotating magnetic field. Unlike a stationary magnetic field produced by a direct current, which we talked about earlier, a rotating magnetic field changes direction in a smooth circular pattern. Its behavior could be explained by picturing that an invisible magnet were spinning inside the motor.

The frequency and design of the motor play a huge part in this process, varying the speed of the rotating magnetic field. This rotational speed is known as the synchronous speed. While

the mechanical rotor of an induction motor does not spin at this speed, the magnetic field itself does.

The discovery and creation of a rotating magnetic field is the essential principle that allows induction motors to function. In the next section, we will dive into the physical construction of the motor, and we will uncover how this rotating magnetic field interacts with the rotor to produce mechanical motion.

III. PHYSICAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN INDUCTION MOTOR

Now that the principles of alternating current and rotating magnetic fields have been rigorously established, the physical structure of an induction motor can be examined. The motor is designed specifically to convert the rotating magnetic field discussed earlier into mechanical motion. Its construction consists of two primary components: the stator and the rotor. These components are separated by a small but crucial space known as the air gap.

A. Stator

The stator is one of the most crucial parts of an induction motor; it is the stationary outer portion of the motor. As its name suggests, the stator does not move during operation. It mainly forms the outer frame of the motor and is where the electrical windings are located, which are responsible for producing the rotating magnetic field. The primary structural components of an induction motor are illustrated in Figure 8.

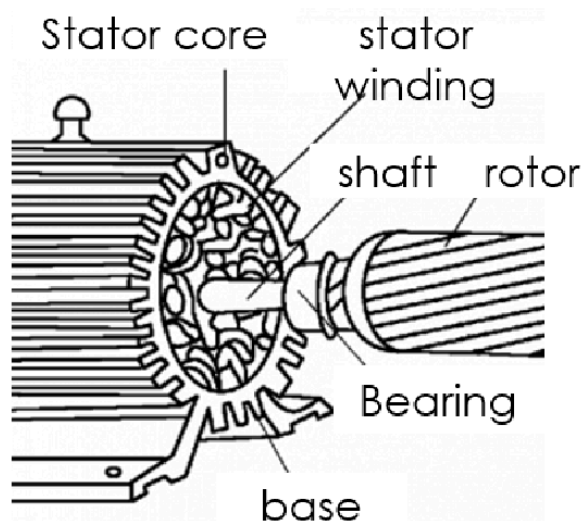


Figure 8. Cross-sectional view of an induction motor showing the stator, rotor, and air gap.

Inside the stator are coils of insulated copper wire arranged in slots around a circular iron core. When a three-phase alternating current flows through these windings, each coil creates its own

magnetic field. Because the currents are phase-shifted, the magnetic fields combine to produce the rotating magnetic field described in the previous section.

The stator's iron core is typically composed of laminated steel sheets. These sheets are stacked together to reduce energy losses that could occur from unwanted circulating currents within the metal. In doing so, this minimizes losses and allows the motor to operate more efficiently. In summary, the stator's function is to generate the precisely timed rotating magnetic fields that drive the motor's operation.

B. Rotor

The rotor is the inner rotating component of the induction motor. It is positioned inside the stator and is mounted on a shaft, allowing it to spin freely.

In most industrial induction motors, the rotor is constructed in what is known as a squirrel-cage design. This design consists of conductive bars made of aluminum or copper embedded within a cylindrical iron core. The squirrel-cage rotor structure is illustrated in Figure 9. The bars are connected at both ends by conductive rings, forming a closed-loop structure.

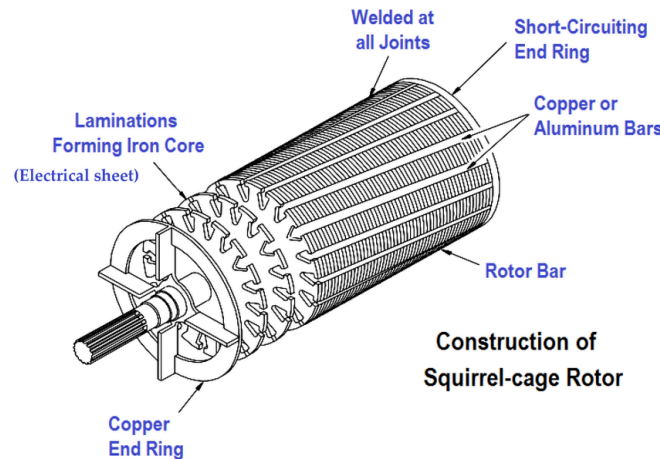


Figure 9. Squirrel-cage showing conductive bars connected by end rings.

Unlike the stator, the rotor doesn't receive electrical power directly through wires. Instead, electrical current is induced within the rotor due to the rotating magnetic fields generated by the stator. This is why the machine is called an "induction" motor; current is induced rather than supplied directly.

The rotor's purpose is to respond to the rotating magnetic field. As currents are induced in the rotor bars, they produce their own magnetic field, which interacts with the stator's magnetic field to generate torque. This torque causes the rotor to turn.

C. Air Gap

Between the stator and the rotor lies a very narrow space known as the air gap. This small gap plays a vital role in motor operation.

The air gap allows the rotor to freely rotate without physical contact with the stator. At the same time, it permits the magnetic field generated by the stator to pass through and interact with the rotor. If the air gap is too large, magnetic coupling weakens and efficiency drops. If it is too small, mechanical friction or contact may occur.

The careful design of the air gap ensures that the magnetic interaction is strong enough to induce current in the rotor while allowing smooth mechanical rotation.

IV. OPERATION AND APPLICATIONS

With the stator, rotor, and air gap properly aligned and arranged, the induction motor is able to convert electrical energy into mechanical motion through electromagnetic interaction.

When three-phase alternating current flows through the stator windings, a rotating magnetic field is produced. This magnetic field moves at the synchronous speed discussed earlier. Because the rotor is positioned within this rotating magnetic field, its conductive bars experience a change in magnetic flux.

According to the principles of electromagnetism, a changing magnetic field within a conductor induces an electric current. In the induction motor, currents are induced within rotor bars as the rotating magnetic field passes over them. This induced current produces its own magnetic field around the rotor. This can be visualized by the illustration in Figure 10.

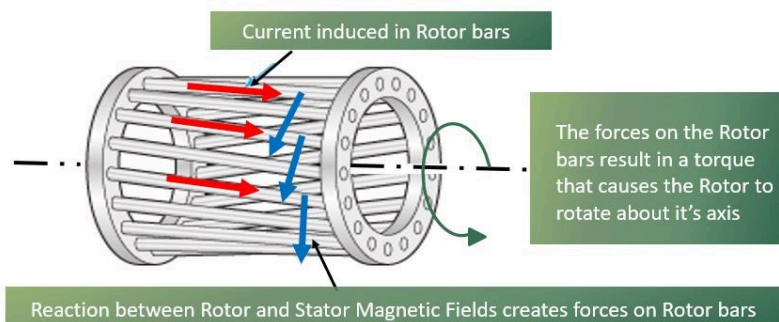


Figure 10. Interaction between the stator's rotating magnetic field and induced currents in the rotor, resulting in torque production.

The interaction between the stator's rotating magnetic field and the magnetic field produced by the rotor generates a force. This force produces torque on the rotor, which causes it to rotate in the same direction as the rotating magnetic field.

However, the rotor does not rotate at the exact synchronous speed. If it were to do this, there would be no relative motion between the rotor and the magnetic field, and no current would be induced. The slight difference between the synchronous speed and the actual rotor speed is known as slip. Slip is essential for maintaining continuous induction and torque production. The relation between torque and slip in an induction motor is illustrated conceptually in Figure 11.

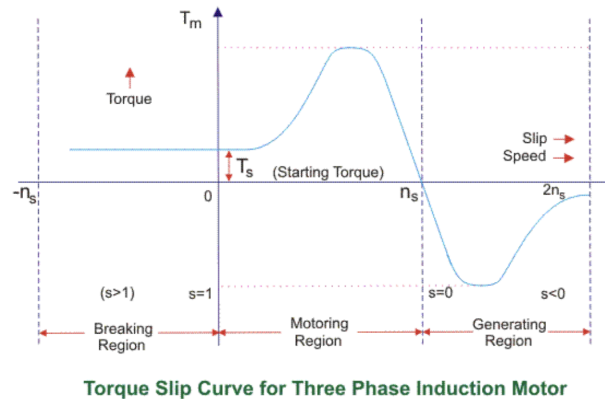


Figure 11. Conceptual torque–slip characteristic curve of an induction motor. Torque increases with slip up to a maximum value before decreasing at higher slip values.

Through this process, electrical energy supplied to the stator is converted into mechanical energy in the form of rotational motion.

Now, because of their simple construction, such as the lack of brushes, and their ability to operate efficiently under varying loads, induction motors are widely used in industrial and household applications. They power things such as pumps, compressors, elevators, conveyor systems, air conditioning units, and numerous other machines that require reliable rotational motion.

V. CONCLUSION

The induction motor demonstrates how the interaction between electricity and magnetism can be harnessed to produce controlled mechanical motion. Beginning with alternating current and progressing through magnetic fields and three-phase systems, the fundamentals combine to create a rotating magnetic field. Through careful physical construction, the stator and rotor interact to convert this invisible electromagnetic phenomenon into usable rotational energy. From industrial machines to everyday appliances, the induction motor remains one of the most reliable and widely used electrical machines in modern society.

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