Self-reconfiguration of Modular Underwater Robots using an Energy Heuristic

This paper investigates self-reconfiguration of a modular robotic system, which consists of a cluster of modular vehicles that can attach to each other by a connection mechanism. Thereby, they can form a desired morphology to meet task specific requirements. Reconfiguration can be needed due to limitations from dimensions of passable corridors for an underwater maintenance task, for supplemental instrumentation that is available on a particular robot, or as remedial action if one robot in a cluster suffers from malfunction. Being crucial for autonomous underwater vehicles, energy consumed is employed as a heuristic. The paper shows how the Basic Theta* algorithm can be guided by an energy criterion to calculate a transition from start- to goal morphology. Individual robots are guided while minimizing the overall energy for propulsion and for balancing restoring forces and moments in morphologies. The properties of the proposed self-reconfiguration algorithm are evaluated through simulations and preliminary model tank experiments. The energy based heuristic for reconfiguration is compared to a traditional solution that minimizes the Euclidean distance.