



Research Article

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Absence of Lavrentiev gap for non-autonomous functionals with (p, q) -growth

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Abstract: We consider non-autonomous functionals of the form $\mathcal{F}(u, \Omega) = \int_{\Omega} f(x, Du(x)) dx$, where $u: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$, $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$. We assume that $f(x, z)$ grows at least as $|z|^p$ and at most as $|z|^q$. Moreover, $f(x, z)$ is Hölder continuous with respect to x and convex with respect to z . In this setting, we give a sufficient condition on the density $f(x, z)$ that ensures the absence of a Lavrentiev gap.

Keywords: Variational integrals, non-standard growth, regularity, Lavrentiev gap

MSC 2010: 49N60

1 Introduction

We consider variational integrals of the form

$$\mathcal{F}(u, \Omega) = \int_{\Omega} f(x, Du(x)) dx \quad (1.1)$$

where $u: \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$, $n \geq 2$, $N \geq 1$, $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is a Caratheodory function, and Ω is bounded and open. Moreover, we assume that, for exponents $1 < p \leq q$ and constants $v, L \in (0, +\infty)$, $c \in [0, +\infty)$, we have

$$v|z|^p - c \leq f(x, z) \leq L(1 + |z|^q). \quad (1.2)$$

In the scalar case $N = 1$, when $p = q$, the local minimizers $u \in W^{1,p}(\Omega)$ of (1.1) are locally Hölder continuous, see [13] and [19, p. 361]. If $p < q$ and q is far from p , then the local minimizers might be unbounded, see [12, 15, 17, 18] and [19, Section 5]. We are concerned with higher integrability for the gradient of minimizers. More precisely, assume that $u: \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$ makes the energy (1.1) finite. Then the left-hand side of (1.2) implies that $Du \in L^p$. In addition to finite energy, we assume that u is a minimizer of (1.1) and we ask: Does the minimality of u boost the integrability of the gradient Du from L^p to L^q ? The answer is given in [9]: We assume that (1.2) holds with $v = 1$, $c = 0$, we require that $z \rightarrow f(x, z) \in C^1(\mathbb{R}^{nN})$ and, for constants $\mu \in [0, 1]$ and $\alpha \in (0, 1]$, we assume that the following hold:

$$L^{-1}(\mu^2 + |z_1|^2 + |z_2|^2)^{\frac{p-2}{2}} |z_1 - z_2|^2 \leq \left\langle \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z_1) - \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z_2); z_1 - z_2 \right\rangle, \quad (1.3)$$

$$\left| \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z) - \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(y, z) \right| \leq L|x - y|^\alpha (1 + |z|^{q-1}). \quad (1.4)$$

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The exponents p and q must be close enough, i.e.,

$$1 < p \leq q < p\left(\frac{n+\alpha}{n}\right). \quad (1.5)$$

We recall that n is the dimension of the space where x lives, i.e., $x \in \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$. Let us remark that (1.5) asserts that the smaller α is, the closer p and q must be. In addition, we assume that the Lavrentiev gap on u is zero:

$$\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0 \quad (1.6)$$

for every ball $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$. Such a Lavrentiev gap will be defined in the next section. Under (1.2)–(1.6), the local minimizers u of (1.1) enjoy higher integrability, i.e., $Du \in L_{\text{loc}}^q(\Omega)$. Checking (1.6) is not easy for non-autonomous densities $f(x, z)$; it has been done in [9] for some model functionals using some arguments due to [22]. The aim of the present paper is to give a sufficient condition on the density $f(x, z)$ that ensures the vanishing of the Lavrentiev gap (1.6), see Theorem 3.1 (4).

2 Preliminaries

In the following Ω will be an open, bounded subset of \mathbb{R}^n , $n \geq 2$, and we will denote

$$B_R \equiv B_R(x_0) := \{x \in \mathbb{R}^n : |x - x_0| < R\},$$

where, unless differently specified, all the balls considered will have the same center. We assume that $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is a Caratheodory function verifying the (p, q) -growth (1.2) with $v = 1$ and $c = 0$. Moreover, we assume that $z \rightarrow f(x, z)$ is convex. Due to the non-standard growth behavior of f , we shall adopt the following notion of local minimizer.

Definition 2.1. A function $u \in W_{\text{loc}}^{1,1}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$ is a local minimizer of \mathcal{F} if and only if $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L_{\text{loc}}^1(\Omega)$ and

$$\int_{\text{supp } \phi} f(x, Du(x)) \, dx \leq \int_{\text{supp } \phi} f(x, Du(x) + D\phi(x)) \, dx,$$

for any $\phi \in W^{1,1}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$ with $\text{supp } \phi \subset\subset \Omega$.

Let us now explain the Lavrentiev gap. We adopt the viewpoint of [4], see also [3]. Let us set

$$X = W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N), \quad Y = W_{\text{loc}}^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N) \cap W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N).$$

We consider functionals $\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty]$ that are sequentially weakly lower semicontinuous (s.w.l.s.c.) on X , and we set

$$\begin{aligned} \bar{\mathcal{F}}_X &= \sup\{\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty] \mid \mathcal{G} \text{ s.w.l.s.c., } \mathcal{G} \leq \mathcal{F} \text{ on } X\}, \\ \bar{\mathcal{F}}_Y &= \sup\{\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty] \mid \mathcal{G} \text{ s.w.l.s.c., } \mathcal{G} \leq \mathcal{F} \text{ on } Y\}. \end{aligned}$$

We have $\bar{\mathcal{F}}_X \leq \bar{\mathcal{F}}_Y$, and we define the Lavrentiev gap as follows:

$$\mathcal{L}(v, B_R) = \bar{\mathcal{F}}_Y(v) - \bar{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) \quad \text{for every } v \in X,$$

when $\bar{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) < +\infty$ and $\mathcal{L}(v, B_R) = 0$ if $\bar{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) = +\infty$. Since $f(x, z)$ is convex with respect to z , standard weak lower semicontinuity results give $\bar{\mathcal{F}}_X = \mathcal{F}$ (see, for instance, [14, Chapter 4]).

The following lemma will be used in the proof of the main theorem (see [4]).

Lemma 2.2. Let $u \in W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$ be a function such that $\mathcal{F}(u, B_R) < +\infty$. Then $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$ if and only if there exists a sequence $\{u_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \subset W_{\text{loc}}^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N) \cap W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$ such that

$$u_m \rightharpoonup u \quad \text{weakly in } W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$$

and

$$\mathcal{F}(u_m, B_R) \rightarrow \mathcal{F}(u, B_R).$$

3 Main section

Theorem 3.1. Let $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ be a function satisfying the following conditions:

- (1) $|z|^p \leq f(x, z) \leq L(1 + |z|^q)$, $1 < p < q < +\infty$,
- (2) $|f(x, z) - f(\bar{x}, z)| \leq H|x - \bar{x}|^\alpha(1 + |z|^q)$, $0 < \alpha \leq 1$,
- (3) $z \mapsto f(x, z)$ is convex for all x ,
- (4) for $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$, $\varepsilon_0 \in (0, 1]$ such that $B_{R+2\varepsilon_0} \subset\subset \Omega$, $x \in B_R$ and $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_0)$, there exists $\tilde{y} = \tilde{y}(x, \varepsilon) \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$ such that for $z \in \mathbb{R}^{nN}$ and $y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$, we have $f(\tilde{y}, z) \leq f(y, z)$.

Let $u \in W_{\text{loc}}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$ such that $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L^1_{\text{loc}}(\Omega)$ and assume that

$$q \leq p \left(\frac{n+\alpha}{n} \right). \quad (3.1)$$

Then $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$ for all $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$.

Remark 3.2. Let us now explain condition (4). For every fixed z , $y \rightarrow f(y, z)$ is continuous, so the minimization of $f(y, z)$ when $y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$ gives a minimizer y depending on x, ε and z . Condition (4) asks for independence on z , i.e., there exists a minimizer \tilde{y} that works for every z . We will first give the proof of Theorem 3.1, and then we will show examples of densities $f(x, z)$ satisfying condition (4).

Remark 3.3. Let us compare (1.5) with (3.1). When proving the absence of the Lavrentiev gap $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$, the borderline case $q = p(\frac{n+\alpha}{n})$ is allowed but we need strict inequality (1.5) when proving higher integrability of minimizers, see [9, p. 32].

Proof. Consider $0 < \varepsilon < \varepsilon_0 \leq 1$ as in hypothesis (4), then $u \in W^{1,p}(B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}; \mathbb{R}^N)$ and

$$\mathcal{F}(u, B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}) = \int_{B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}} f(x, Du(x)) dx < +\infty.$$

Let us denote $u_\varepsilon(x) := (u * \phi_\varepsilon)(x)$, the usual mollification, where $x \in B_R$, and define

$$f_\varepsilon(x, z) = \min_{y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}} f(y, z). \quad (3.2)$$

By definition, it follows that

$$|Du_\varepsilon(x)| \leq \left(\int_{B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}} |Du(y)|^p dy \right)^{\frac{1}{p}} \left(\int_{\mathbb{R}^n} |\phi_\varepsilon(y)|^{p'} dy \right)^{\frac{1}{p'}} \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}},$$

where $C = C(\|Du\|_{L^p}) > 1$. Moreover, by the Hölder continuity hypothesis (i.e., hypothesis (2)), we have

$$f_\varepsilon(x, z) \geq f(x, z) - H\varepsilon^\alpha(1 + |z|^q). \quad (3.3)$$

Note that the left-hand side of hypothesis (1) gives

$$|z|^p \leq f_\varepsilon(x, z). \quad (3.4)$$

Now we observe that is possible to find $K = K(p, q, \|Du\|_{L^p}, H) < +\infty$ such that

$$f(x, z) \leq Kf_\varepsilon(x, z) + H, \quad x \in B_R, |z| \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}}. \quad (3.5)$$

Indeed, let us fix $\delta \in (0, 1)$ and observe that, using (3.3), (3.4) and $|z| \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}}$, we get

$$\begin{aligned} f_\varepsilon(x, z) &= \delta f_\varepsilon(x, z) + (1 - \delta)f_\varepsilon(x, z) \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha(1 + |z|^q) + (1 - \delta)|z|^p \\ &= \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha|z|^q + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &= \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha|z|^p|z|^{q-p} + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) - \delta C^{q-p}H\varepsilon^{\alpha+(\frac{p-q}{p})n}|z|^p + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) + (1 - \delta - \delta C^{q-p}H)|z|^p - \delta H, \end{aligned}$$

where the last estimate relies on the fact that $\frac{q}{p} \leq \frac{n+\alpha}{n}$, $0 < \alpha \leq 1$ and $0 < \varepsilon < 1$. Then (3.5) follows choosing $K = \frac{1}{\delta} = 1 + C^{q-p}H$. Now, using hypothesis (4), Jensen's inequality and (3.2), we obtain

$$\begin{aligned} f_\varepsilon(x, Du_\varepsilon(x)) &= f(\tilde{y}, Du_\varepsilon(x)) \\ &\leq \int_{B(x, \varepsilon)} f(\tilde{y}, Du(y)) \phi_\varepsilon(x-y) dy \\ &\leq \int_{B(x, \varepsilon)} f(y, Du(y)) \phi_\varepsilon(x-y) dy \\ &= (f(\cdot, Du(\cdot)) * \phi_\varepsilon)(x) \\ &=: f(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x). \end{aligned} \quad (3.6)$$

Therefore, using (3.5), we have

$$f(x, Du_\varepsilon(x)) \leq Kf(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x) + H.$$

Finally, since $f(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x) \rightarrow f(x, Du(x))$ strongly in $L^1(B_R)$, by recalling that $u_\varepsilon \rightarrow u$ in $W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$, and by using a well-known variant of Lebesgue's dominated convergence theorem and Lemma 2.2, the proof is completed. \square

Remark 3.4. We note that our assumption (4) is very close to [22, assumption (2.3)]. Our proof is inspired by the one of [9, Lemma 13], which, in turn, is based on some arguments used in [22].

Remark 3.5. Now we give some examples of functions for which Theorem 3.1 is valid.

(1) $f(x, z) = b(z) + a(x)c(z)$ with the following conditions:

- (i) $a \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$ and $a(x) \geq 0$ for all x ,
- (ii) b and c are convex functions such that

$$|z|^p \leq b(z) \leq H(|z|^q + 1) \quad \text{for } H \geq 1, \quad 0 \leq c(z) \leq L(|z|^q + 1) \quad \text{for } L \geq 1.$$

For instance, we can consider the following functions:

- $f(x, z) = b(z)$, independent of x .
- $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)|z|^q$. This example has been already dealt with in [9]; see also [1, 6–8, 10, 22].
- $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)|z|^p \ln(e + |z|)$. This example is taken from [1, 2].
- $f(x, z) = |z|^2 + a(x)[\max\{z_n, 0\}]^q$, where $q > 2$. This example is inspired by [21].
- $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)[|z_1 - z_2|^q + |z_1|^q]$, where $1 < p < q < +\infty$. This example is inspired by [5].
- (2) $f(x, z) = \sum_{i=1}^k [b_i(z) + a_i(x)c_i(z)]$, where $k \in \mathbb{N}$ and a_i, b_i, c_i verify the corresponding conditions of the previous example for all $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, k\}$.
- (3) $f(x, z) = h(\sum_{i=1}^k [b_i(z) + a_i(x)c_i(z)])$, where, in addition to the previous conditions, h is increasing, convex, Lipschitz and such that $s \leq h(s) \leq \alpha s + \beta$.
- (4) $f(x, z) = h(a(x), z)$ with the following conditions:
 - (i) $t \mapsto h(t, z)$ is increasing,
 - (ii) h is convex with respect to the second variable,
 - (iii) $a \in C(\bar{\Omega})$,
 - (iv) f verifies assumptions (1) and (2) of Theorem 3.1.

For example,

$$f(x, z) = |z|^p + (e + \tilde{a}(x)|z|)^{a+b \sin(\ln(\ln(e+\tilde{a}(x)|z|)))},$$

where $\tilde{a} \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$, $\tilde{a}(x) \geq 0$ for all x , $a \geq 1 + 2b\sqrt{2}$ and $b > 0$. In order to satisfy the non-standard (p, q) -growth condition, we can consider $1 < p < a + b \leq q$. This example is inspired by [11, 20], see also [16].

Remark 3.6. Hypothesis (4) was used during the proof of Theorem 3.1 in order to obtain the second increase in (3.6). Now we want to show an example of a function for which hypothesis (4) fails. Let us consider $\Omega = B(0, 1) \subset \mathbb{R}^2$ and the function $f: B(0, 1) \times \mathbb{R}^{2N} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ such that

$$f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)(|z|^q - 1) + 1,$$

where, for $x = (x_1, x_2)$,

$$a(x) = \begin{cases} x_2 & \text{if } x_2 > 0, \\ 0 & \text{if } x_2 \leq 0. \end{cases}$$

In this case the minimum point of the function changes depending on the choice of z . Indeed, let us consider $B_R = B(0, \frac{1}{2})$, $\varepsilon_0 = \frac{1}{8}$, $x = 0$. Then we deal with the two cases: $|z| = 0$ and $|z| = 2$.

When $|z| = 0$, we have

$$f(y, z) = \begin{cases} -y_2 + 1 & \text{if } y_2 > 0, \\ 1 & \text{if } y_2 \leq 0, \end{cases}$$

and then the minimum value in $\overline{B(0, \varepsilon)}$ is reached for $\tilde{y} = (0, \varepsilon)$.

If $|z| = 2$, then

$$f(y, z) = \begin{cases} 2^p + y_2(2^q - 1) + 1 & \text{if } y_2 > 0, \\ 2^p + 1 & \text{if } y_2 \leq 0, \end{cases}$$

and therefore, in this situation, \tilde{y} is any point (y_1, y_2) such that $y_2 \leq 0$.

Corollary 3.7. *Let $h: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ be a function verifying Theorem 3.1 and let $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ be a function such that*

$$h(x, z) - c_1 \leq f(x, z) \leq h(x, z) + c_2,$$

where $c_1, c_2 \geq 0$. We consider $u \in W_{\text{loc}}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$ such that $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L_{\text{loc}}^1(\Omega)$ and assume $q \leq p(\frac{n+\alpha}{n})$. Then $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$ for all $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$.

Proof. We follow the proof of [9, Theorem 6]. By the proof of Theorem 3.1, if $u \in W_{\text{loc}}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$ is such that $h(x, Du(x)) \in L_{\text{loc}}^1(\Omega)$, then there exists a sequence $\{u_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \subset W^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$ such that $u_m \rightarrow u$ strongly in $W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$, $Du_m(x) \rightarrow Du(x)$ a.e., $h(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow h(x, Du(x))$ a.e., and $\int_{B_R} h(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow \int_{B_R} h(x, Du(x))$. Using a well-known variant of Lebesgue's dominated convergence theorem, we have that

$$\int_{B_R} f(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow \int_{B_R} f(x, Du(x)),$$

and then, by Lemma 2.2, $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$. □

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