

Innovative coating for Electroplated Hard Chromium replacement in severe environments

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The aim of this paper is the study and the characterization of new solutions for the replacement of Electroplated Hard Chromium (EHC) coatings in severe environments. Starting from the failure analysis of hard chromium at high temperature and subjected to severe wear conditions, the phenomena and mechanisms leading to coating failure were investigated and understood. From this preliminary analysis the coating main properties were identified and innovative solutions were considered and studied to check their suitability for the application.

Finally, the characterization of the proposed solution was compared to the properties and the failure mechanism of similar type of coatings used in the same environmental conditions.

The innovative solutions considered in this paper are electroplated double layer nickel chromium and ceramic coatings obtained by thermal spraying with different techniques, specifically a tungsten carbide in cobalt or cobalt chromium matrix by High Velocity Oxygen Fuel (HVOF) and High Velocity Air Fuel techniques (HVOF).

KEYWORDS: FAILURE ANALYSIS, ELECTRODEPOSITED HARD CHROMIUM, THERMAL SPRAY CERAMIC COATING, HIGH VELOCITY OXYGEN FUEL (HVOF), HIGH VELOCITY AIR FUEL (HVOF), WEAR RESISTANCE

INTRODUCTION

Electroplated Hard Chromium (EHC) is usually employed in applications under severe operating condition. Its mechanical and chemical features allow its use in high temperature environments subjected to wear and exposed to corrosive agents.

EHC requires the use of hexavalent Cr [1] [2] [3], however, the increased awareness of its toxicity, compelled the imposition of rules for the wastewater treatments and for the workers exposure [4]. Additionally, it has to be considered also the increasing demand of recycling solutions, which required the increment of the component life and successively an easier and eco-friendly disposal. Considering the complex and severe environments, to replace EHC, the innovative solutions considered in this work are an electroplated double layer nickel chromium and different thermal sprayed ceramic coatings, specifically tungsten carbide in cobalt or cobalt chromium matrix. Two different thermal sprayed techniques are also taken into account: High Velocity Oxygen Fuel (HVOF) and High Velocity Air Fuel techniques (HVOF).

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Starting from the failure analysis of existing hard chromium coatings, the failure conditions and the mechanism of failure were individuated. Based on this analysis, a proper experimental procedure was designed to identify the main as-deposited coating properties, thus being a reference for the selected innovative ones. The properties and failure mechanisms of these alternative solutions, tested at the same conditions, were studied and compared to the EHC.

The experimental procedure adopted was defined considering the main physical and chemical severe conditions that the coating has to face (mechanical stresses, friction, temperature gradients and chemical corrosion) in the majority of its applications. In particular: coating mechanical properties such as hardness and adhesion are used to investigate resistance to mechanical stresses; wear test at 200 °C is used to verify the wear

resistance and friction coefficient at temperature different from the ambient one. Finally, a zinc corrosion test is performed to verify the shielding ability of coatings, required to avoid penetration of detrimental elements that could react with the substrate material, leading to the component failure [5].

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

Material and visual inspection

Different samples were studied; some were preliminary tested at high temperature (around 200 °C) and subjected to mechanical loads and sliding friction, together with the presence of detrimental elements (Zn and S) [5].

Summary of the samples and main information are reported in the following table (Tab.1).

Tab.1 - Sample name and composition specifics.

| Sample name | Substrate | Coating | Thickness (µm) | Tested before analysis |
|------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Cr140FC | Pure copper | Hard chromium | 140 | Yes, finished the cycles. |
| Cr90N | Pure copper | Hard chromium | 90 | No |
| NiCr90N | Pure copper | Double layer nickel - chromium | Cr: 90 Ni: 130 | No |
| WC-23CoN | Copper silver alloy | HVOF WC-23Co | <200 differently from specification | No |
| WC-11Co5CrN-grad | Pure copper | HVOF WC-11Co-5Cr | Top: 40 Middle: 110 Bottom: 150 | No, with gradient thickness |
| WC-10Co5CrN-grad | Pure copper | HVOF WC-10Co-5Cr | Top: 115 Bottom: 160 | No, gradient thickness, damaged during transportation |
| WC-23CoU | Copper silver alloy | HVOF WC-23Co | 155 | Yes, compromised coating integrity. Presence of surface and transversal cracks |
| WC-25CoD | Copper with fine dispersion of chromium particles | HVOF WC-25Co | 150 | Yes, coating delamination and substrate cracking |
| WC-Co-H-VAFused | Pure copper | HVOF WC16Cox | 75 | Yes, coating delamination and substrate cracking |

In the case of tested samples, especially those already preliminary damaged, more accurate sample selection is required: samples from both visibly defected and non-defected regions are chosen to understand the failure mechanisms and characterize the properties of the coating during operations.

Detailed about the parameters used for the production of the samples are not available due to confidentiality reasons.

Characterization

Optical microscopy and SEM

Visual characterization was carried out with Light Optical Microscopy (LOM) ("Nikon eclipse LV150NL") and Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) ("Zeiss evo 50"). Visual characterization was performed to measure the coatings thickness and to characterize the coating morphology.

It was possible to estimate the grain dimensions in the copper substrate with the line method by image analysis on micrographs of etched samples with an acid solution prepared as 10 g FeCl₃, 50 ml HCl, 10 ml HNO₃ and 100 ml H₂O.

Chemical composition analysis was also performed with the Energy Dispersive X-ray (EDX) spectroscopy to aid the identification of the ceramic coating phases and the contaminations from the liquid metal contact.

Hardness (ISO 6507)

Vickers micro-hardness measurements were conducted with different parameters for each region of the samples. The load employed for the copper substrate was 100 gf, while for the coating cross section a load of 300 gf was used, due to the presence of very thin coatings.

Adhesion: transversal scratch test (ISO 2819 - EN 1071 for electroplated coatings and ISO 27307 for ceramic coatings)

Transversal scratch test evaluates the adhesion of the coating by measuring its critical load (i.e. the load that causes cracks to form starting from the interface substrate-coating). If cracks develop inside the coating, the cohesive strength is smaller than adhesive strength.

The transversal scratch test machine used is the "CSM

instruments Micro-combi tester" and the testing conditions for all samples were at constant load, at speed of 1.2 mm/min, a scratch length of 2 mm, and a Rockwell diamond-type indenter with a radius of 200 µm. Statistical evaluation was performed, when possible, using a 66% probability, indicating the presence of cracks in 2 out of 3 tests at the same load.

Wear test

Wear testing was conducted to measure the friction coefficient and to qualitatively evaluate the behaviour of coatings at 200 °C. The linear test was performed with the "Rtec instruments Multifunction Tribometer MFT 5000" with an alumina ball of 6 mm as pin. Test duration was set at 12 minutes with a frequency of 15 Hz and a track length of 6.835 mm, resulting in a linear velocity of approximately 0.21 m/s.

Molten zinc test

It is widely reported that zinc and sulphur diffusion in copper substrate through damaged coating leads to the formation of fragile intermetallic alloys that causes the deterioration of the entire coating. Samples with dimensions (HxWxD) 1.5x1.5x0.5 cm were prepared and immersed in molten zinc. After 4 hours they were extracted and prepared for a visual and chemical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Electroplated hard chromium coating failure analysis

The sample Cr90N shows the typical structure of EHC coatings [4] [6] as well as the sample Cr140FC, even though visibly damaged due to the service conditions at which it was subjected before being analysed.

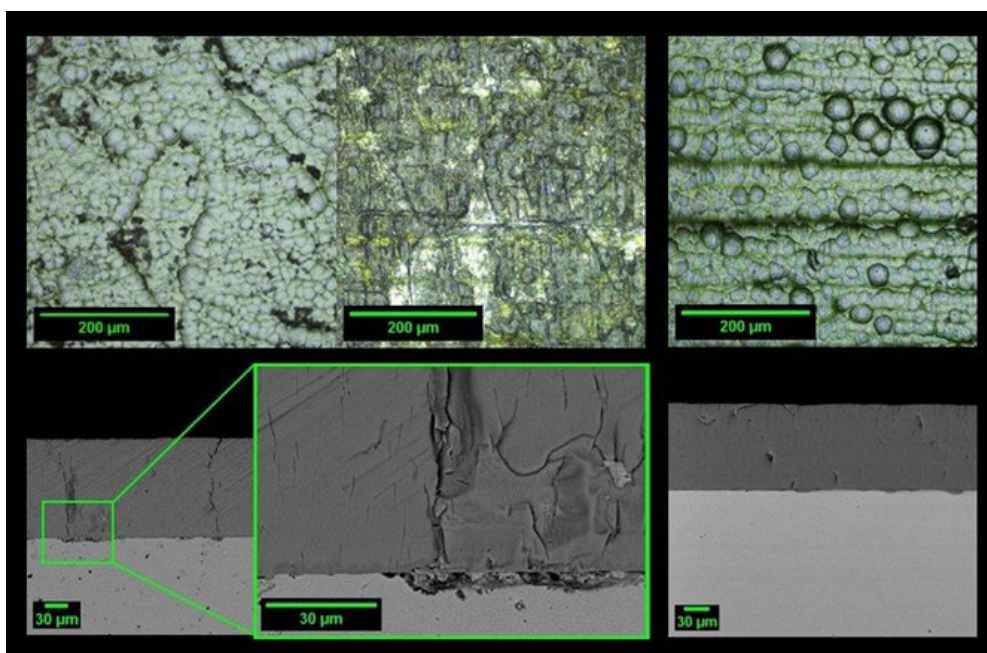


Fig.1 - Surface and cross section of EHC coatings: Cr140FC on the left and Cr90N on the right.

As can be seen in Fig.1, the coating surface of Cr140FC have the typical cracks of the EHC, moreover scratches and abraded zones are also visible. Transversal cracks along the entire coating thickness are visible in the cross

section of the sample, while these are reduced in Cr90N. The average values of the mechanical test results are reported in the Tab.2.

Tab.2 - Mechanical test results: hardness and adhesion.

| Sample | Coating hardness | Substrate hardness | Critical Load |
|---------|------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Cr90N | 892.0 | 108.8 | 12 |
| Cr140FC | 749.6 | 95.8 | 26 |

Since metallic elements not belonging to the nominal composition of the materials were individuated inside the transversal cracks of Cr140FC (see Fig.2), a zinc test was

performed on both samples. In both samples delamination was observed after immersion in the molten metal, as can be observed in Fig.3.

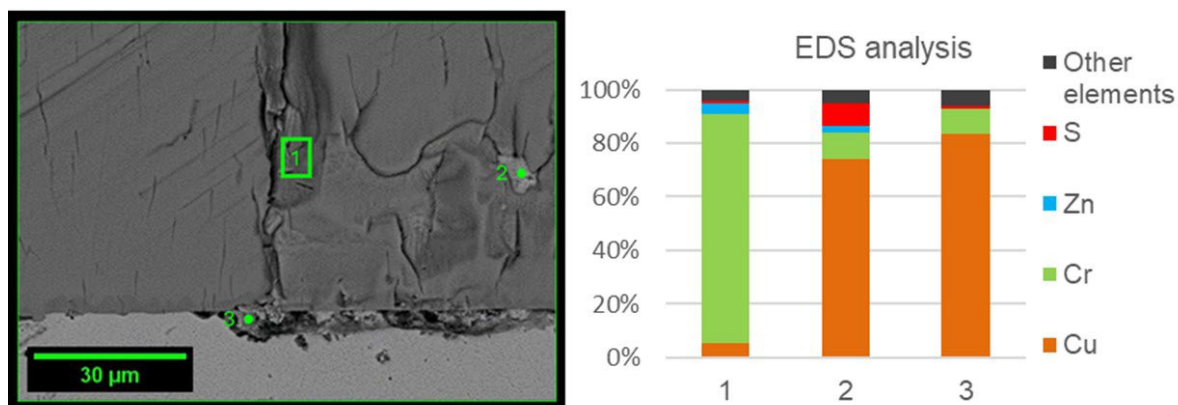


Fig.2 - Coating defect of sample Cr140FC (left) and EDX analysis of the infiltrated elements.

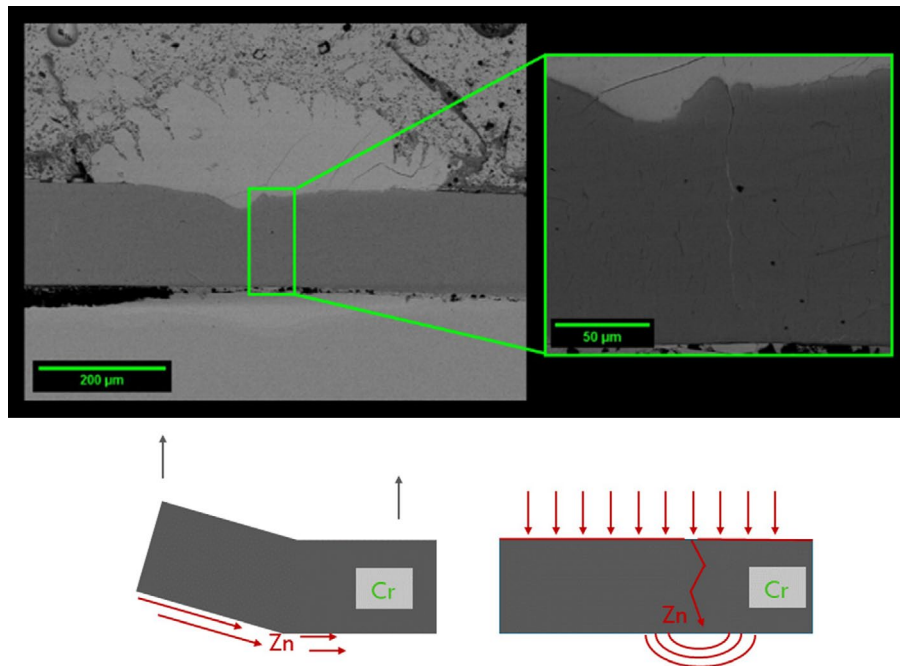


Fig.3 - SEM images and scheme of the infiltration mechanism of Zn for the EHC coating.

Cr90N has a lower thickness compared to Cr140FC, however the coating and substrate hardness are higher: the latter is due to the presence of silver in the substrate, which improves the mechanical properties of the alloy with respect to pure copper.

Besides, the critical load of Cr90N is much lower than Cr140FC. This can be explained by the initial conditions: coating Cr140FC was exposed to high temperature and to compression stresses for a long period, which could have enhanced the chemical bond between coating and substrate.

From the results of the analysis on Cr140FC it was clear that infiltration of zinc and sulphur, with the subsequent formation of intermetallics with the copper substrate, was the principal cause of the coating failure together with the mechanical stresses leading to transversal cracks formation. These connect the substrate to the external part of the coating, thus hindering the shielding ability of the material.

The zinc test confirmed the coating failure mechanism: fragile copper-based intermetallics containing mostly sulphur and zinc formed due to the molten metal penetration through the hard chromium microcracks and, they weakened the interface, finally leading to coating delamination owing to the pressure generated

by the volume of liquid itself. In the case of Cr140FC, the effect of compressive and shear stresses on the surface during wear tests allowed a partial microcracks closure, thus delaying the infiltration of the molten metal and the consequent chemical attack mechanism.

Characterization of innovative solution coating for EHC replacement

For the NiCr90N coating, micrographs in Fig.4 display the difference between the electrodeposited chromium and the electrodeposited nickel layers: the former features pores and microcracks, the latter is compact.

All thermal spray coatings showed thickness and composition inhomogeneities: the former is more evident for the HVOF WC-23CoN and for the samples with lower thickness, while the latter is present in all samples since it is an intrinsic characteristic of the deposition process. In particular, cobalt and chromium rich islands were detected.

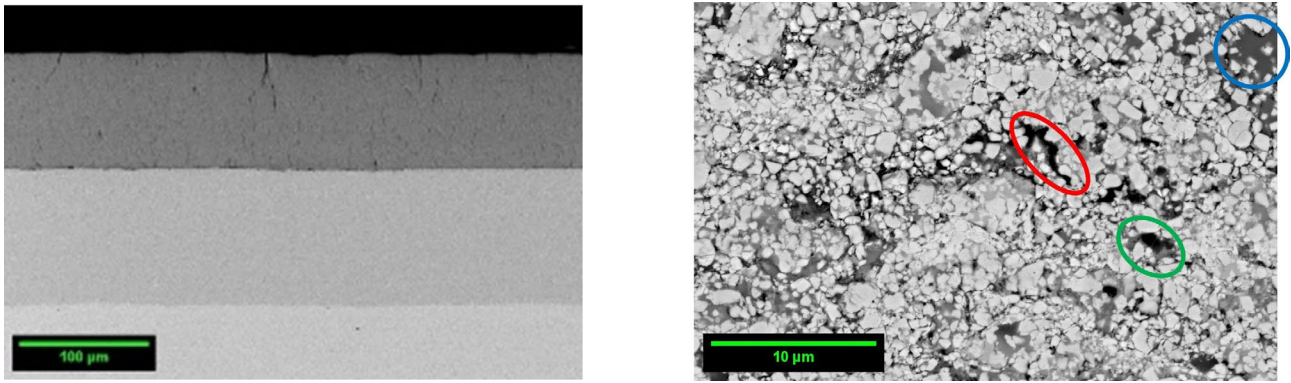


Fig.4 - NiCr90N double layer coating, from top to bottom: Cr layer, Ni layer and Cu substrate (left). WC-10Co5CrNgrad coating microstructure inhomogeneities, indicated by the red circle for Fe particles, blue for Co-rich and green for Cr-rich pools.

The difference in the compositions is reflected in the hardness values: even though WC-23CoN has a similar thickness to WC-11Co5CrNgrad middle and bottom sections and WC-10Co5CrNgrad bottom part, its hardness is slightly lower due to the reduced carbide fraction (Fig.5). Considering the three sections of WC-11Co5CrNgrad, it can be noticed an increasing thickness accompanied by a coherent trend in the coating and in the substrate hardness. Substrate of thicker thermal spray coatings are, in fact, subjected to high temperature and

compressive stresses for a prolonged time, inducing recrystallization and plastic deformation at the surface, which is reflected on the average grain size at the interface coating-substrate (Fig.6). NiCr90N, WC-23CoN and WC-11Co5CrNgrad top have lower coating hardnesses, but they are still comparable to EHC.

It should also be noted that HVOF could be detrimental to the hardness of the coating, owing to the stronger decarburization effect on the WC fraction with respect to the HVAF process [7] [8].

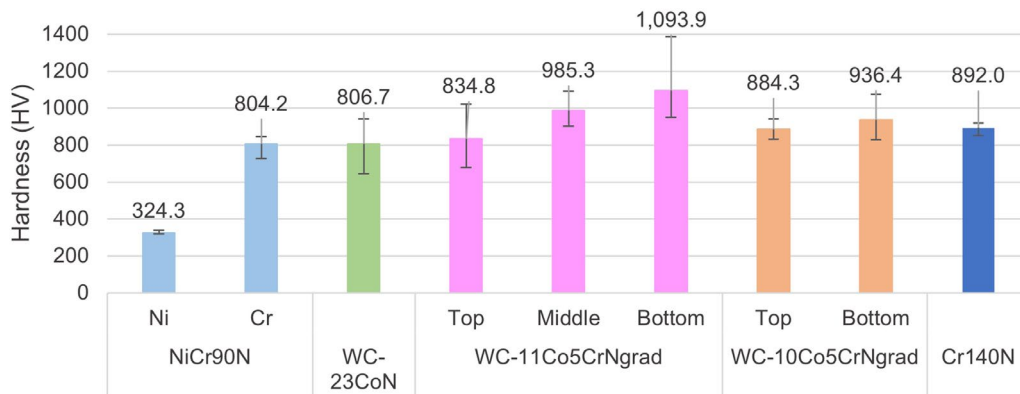


Fig.5 - Coating cross section hardness comparison using a load of 300 gf.

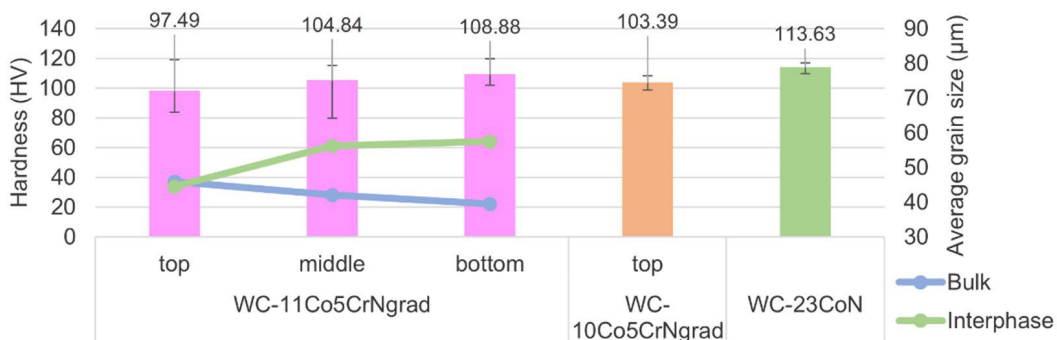


Fig.6 - Substrate hardness comparison using a load of 100 gf and corresponding average grain size for the sample WC-11Co5CrNgrad.

Thermal sprayed coating showed a greater adhesion than EHC even though the bond between coating and substrate is physical and not chemical as in electrodeposition. The greater the thickness of the thermal sprayed coating the higher is the adhesion strength; indeed, thinner coating showed a very low adhesion, although it was still comparable to Cr90N and NiCr90N samples (Tab.3). All samples showed a lower dynamic friction coefficient

with respect to Cr90N, apart from WC-23CoN which showed a comparable value for the test at 5 N and a lower value at 7 N. Despite this, the material removal rate of all thermal spray coatings was almost negligible, the profilometry of the tracks were almost comparable to the surface roughness while for the electroplated coating a relevant depth was detected.

Tab.3 - Adhesion and wear performances of the innovative solution coatings.

| | | Cr90N | NiCr90N | WC-23CoN | WC-11Co5CrNgrad | | | WC-10Co5CrNgrad | |
|----------------------|-----|-------|---------|----------|-----------------|--------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | | | | | Top | Middle | Bottom | Top | Bottom |
| Critical load (N) | | 12 | 18 | >30 | <15 | <25 | >30 | ~15 | ~25 |
| Friction coefficient | 5 N | 0.30 | 0.25 | 0.31 | 0.20 | 0.25 | 0.18 | 0.19 | - |
| | 7 N | 0.44 | 0.24 | 0.32 | 0.26 | 0.29 | 0.22 | 0.21 | - |

All thermal spray coatings showed an excellent resistance to zinc corrosion with the exception of the thinner sample of WC-11Co5CrNgrad, while NiCr90N revealed a peculiar behaviour. In this case, the chromium layer

was completely delaminated, however the nickel layer succeeded in protecting the copper substrate, consequently no detrimental intermetallic phase was formed below the coating.

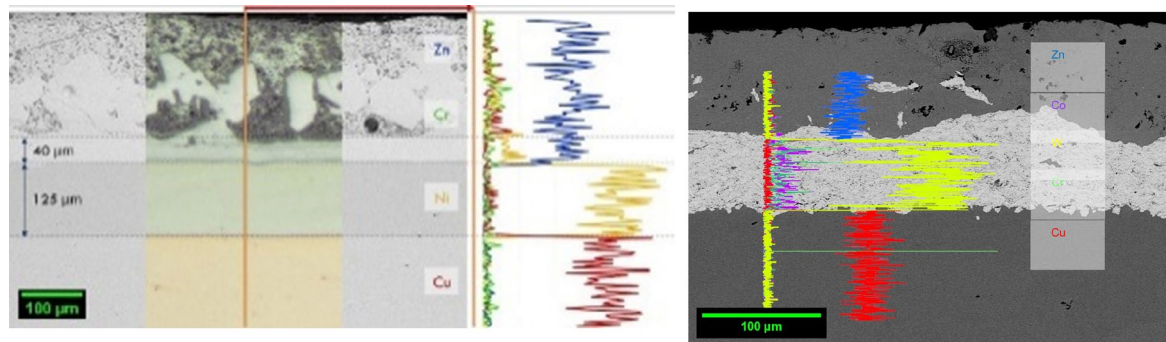


Fig.7 - NiCr90N EDX line analysis (left). WC-11Co5CrNgrad middle EDX line analysis.

Thermal sprayed coating failure analysis

Since thermal sprayed coatings showed good characteristics with respect to the experimental campaign conducted, they were also studied in the combined severe environmental conditions to which the Cr140FC coating was initially subjected.

This last experimental campaign on the proposed thermal spray coating, was focused on the failure phenomena occurring, once the coating is subjected to the combination of stresses due to temperature, load and chemical interaction. Since in the previous analysis was evidenced that

thickness and thermal spray technology were the main influencing parameters, preliminary characterization on the coatings was not performed. The aim was to see the failure that could occur in the coatings, by considering the worse condition: low thickness for the HVOF coating and HVOF technology, instead of HVOF.

WC-Co-HVOFused was studied only by optical and chemical analysis. The proposed failure mechanism was attributed firstly to the insufficient coating thickness, that led to the deformation of the ductile substrate, as can be seen in Fig.8. After reaching critical deformation, brittle

cracking of the ceramic coating initiates at the surface. Consequently, stressed copper was then "extruded" and attacked by detrimental elements, mainly sulphur and traces of zinc.

Successively, crack opening and penetration of metals

under the coating in the weak spots occurred, leading to coating delamination caused by weak interphases and mechanical forces at the surface, as well as cohesion failure and erosion.

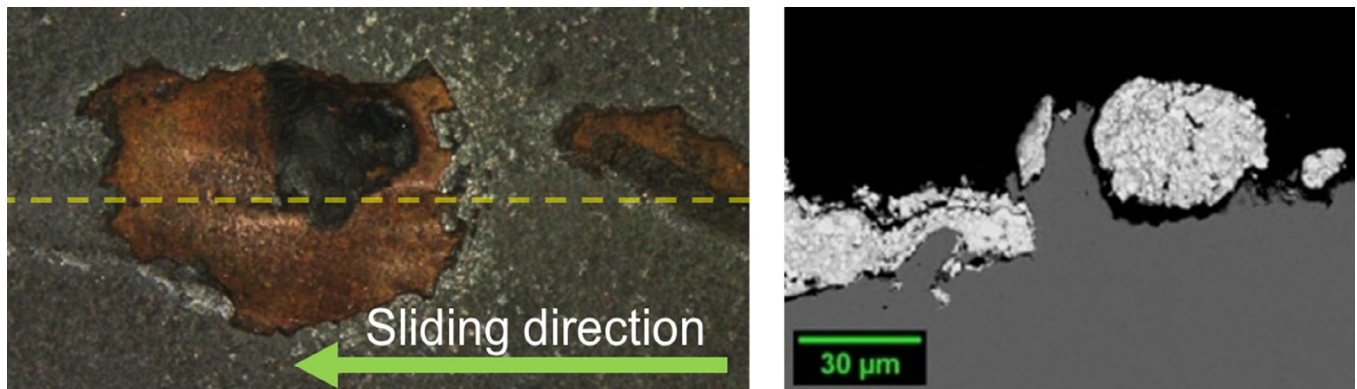


Fig.8 - WC-Co-HVAFused defect (left). Detail of defect cross section (right).

Differently from the WC-Co-HVAFused, WC-25CoD and WC-23CoU had a different mechanism of failure owing to their higher thickness.

These two samples do not show localized defects but extended erosion, coating surface cracks and depletion in the most stressed region. The depletion zone is higher in the WC-23CoU sample with respect to the WC-25CoD. The samples have different substrates: WC-25CoD features copper with chromium and zirconia particles, which is reflected in the higher hardness (110 HV instead of 94 HV), as opposed to WC-23CoU that comprises pure copper. This difference may be the cause of the earlier failure.

For both samples the adhesion strength is higher than 30 N.

Due to surface cracks, slag elements were able to penetrate through the coating and react with the substrate. Both samples showed presence of cracks also in the substrate, in particular WC-25CoD shows deeper average cracks (~3.1 mm instead of ~0.5 mm) owing to its prolonged usage time (triple than WC-23CoU).

In all cases zinc contamination of the crack edges is present.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of hard chromium coatings (Cr140D and WC-23CoN) identified chemical corrosion as the main failure

cause, owing to reaction with zinc and sulphur penetrating the coatings through microcracks. Delamination and substrate damage resulted from the formation of intermetallic alloys at the interface. Different innovative coatings exhibited varying levels of protection.

Double layer coating represents a valid alternative to the single layer, since the substrate is protected by the zinc layer, however frequent repairs would be needed and the hexavalent chromium problem would not be solved.

Ceramic coatings represent a promising alternative. The study emphasized the importance of thickness and composition, highlighting challenges such as thermal sensitivity and fragility during sample preparation. Besides also the characteristics of the substrate influences failures. Failures in WC-25CoD and WC-23CoU coatings were attributed to friction-induced depressions in the most stressed region, while WC-Co-HVAFused low thickness led to localized substrate deformation.

Adjusting the thickness and toughness of thermal sprayed cermet coatings is essential for their use in severe wear and temperature environments. Further research is needed to optimize the coating composition and to limit the costs for high thickness.

AKNOLEGMENTS

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