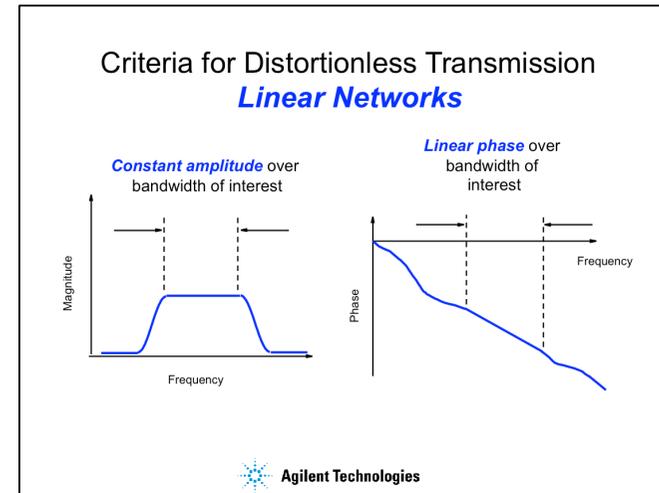


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Before we explore linear signal distortion, let's review the differences between linear and nonlinear behavior. Devices that behave linearly only impose magnitude and phase changes on input signals. Any sinusoid appearing at the input will also appear at the output at the same frequency. No new signals are created. When a single sinusoid is passed through a linear network, we don't consider amplitude and phase changes as distortion. However, when a complex, time-varying signal is passed through a linear network, the amplitude and phase shifts can dramatically distort the time-domain waveform.

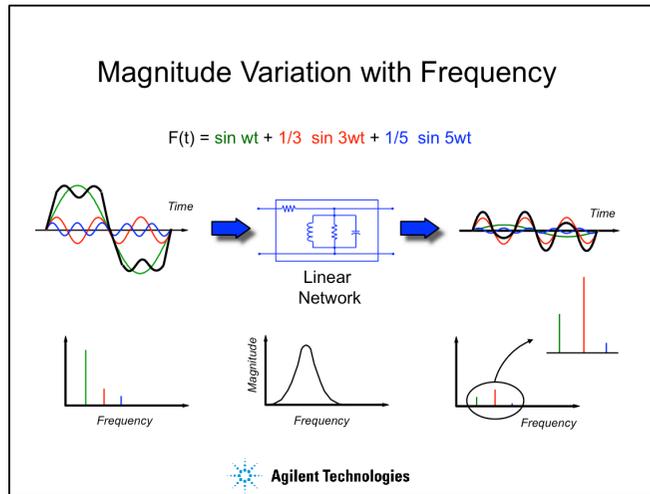
Non-linear devices can shift input signals in frequency (a mixer for example) and/or create new signals in the form of harmonics or intermodulation products. Many components that behave linearly under most signal conditions can exhibit nonlinear behavior if driven with a large enough input signal. This is true for both passive devices like filters and even connectors, and active devices like amplifiers



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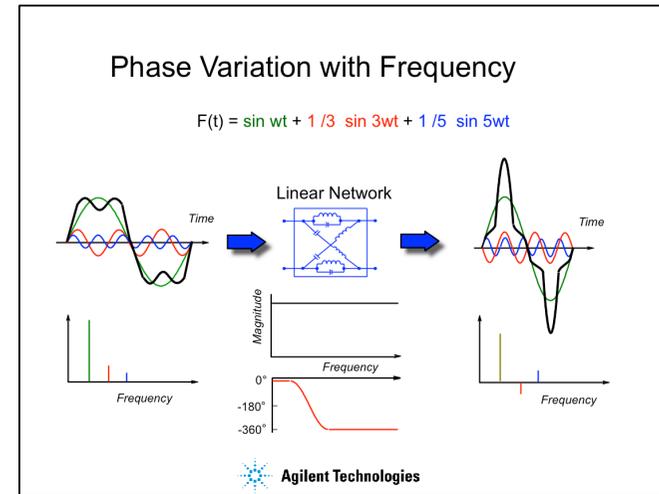
Now let's examine how linear networks can cause signal distortion. There are three criteria that must be satisfied for linear *distortionless* transmission. First, the amplitude (magnitude) response of the device or system must be flat over the bandwidth of interest. This means all frequencies within the bandwidth will be attenuated identically. Second, the phase response must be linear over the bandwidth of interest. And last, the device must exhibit a "minimum-phase response", which means that at 0 Hz (DC), there is 0° phase shift (0° = n * 180° is okay if we don't mind an inverted signal).

How can magnitude and phase distortion occur? The following two examples will illustrate how both magnitude and phase responses can introduce linear signal distortion.



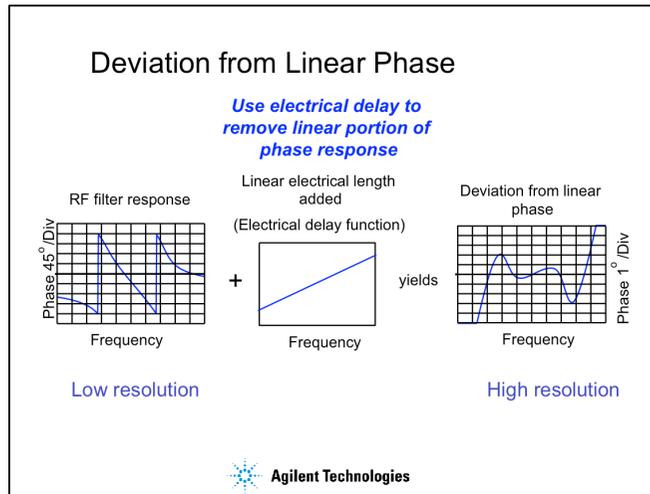
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Here is an example of a square wave (consisting of three sinusoids) applied to a bandpass filter. The filter imposes a non-uniform amplitude change to each frequency component. Even though no phase changes are introduced, the frequency components no longer sum to a square wave at the output. The square wave is now severely distorted, having become more sinusoidal in nature.



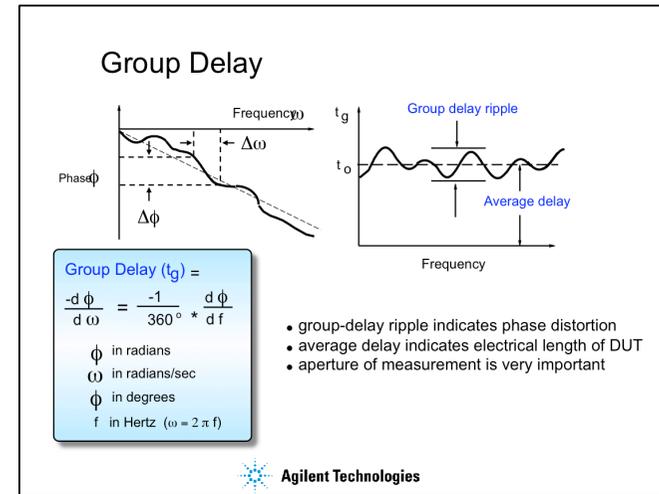
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Let's apply the same square wave to another filter. Here, the third harmonic undergoes a 180° phase shift, but the other components are not phase shifted. All the amplitudes of the three spectral components remain the same (filters which only affect the phase of signals are called allpass filters). The output is again distorted, appearing very impulsive this time.



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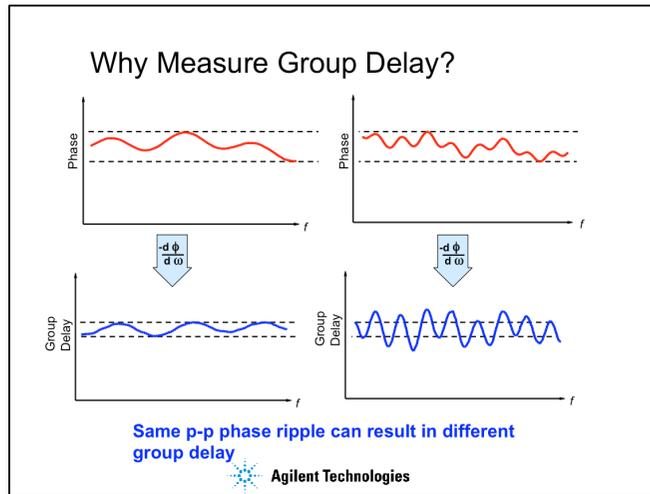
Now that we know insertion phase versus frequency is a very important characteristic of a component, let's see how we would measure it. Looking at insertion phase directly is usually not very useful. This is because the phase has a negative slope with respect to frequency due to the electrical length of the device (the longer the device, the greater the slope). Since it is only the deviation from linear phase which causes distortion, it is desirable to remove the linear portion of the phase response. This can be accomplished by using the electrical delay feature of the network analyzer to cancel the electrical length of the DUT. This results in a high-resolution display of phase distortion (deviation from linear phase).



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Another useful measure of phase distortion is group delay. Group delay is a measure of the transit time of a signal through the device under test, versus frequency. Group delay is calculated by differentiating the insertion-phase response of the DUT versus frequency. Another way to say this is that group delay is a measure of the slope of the transmission phase response. The linear portion of the phase response is converted to a constant value (representing the average signal-transit time) and deviations from linear phase are transformed into deviations from constant group delay. The variations in group delay cause signal distortion, just as deviations from linear phase cause distortion. Group delay is just another way to look at linear phase distortion.

When specifying or measuring group delay, it is important to quantify the aperture in which the measurement is made. The aperture is defined as the frequency delta used in the differentiation process (the denominator in the group-delay formula). As we widen the aperture, trace noise is reduced but less group-delay resolution is available (we are essentially averaging the phase response over a wider window). As we make the aperture more narrow, trace noise increases but we have more measurement resolution.



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Why are both deviation from linear phase and group delay commonly measured? Depending on the device, both may be important. Specifying a maximum peak-to-peak value of phase ripple is not sufficient to completely characterize a device since the slope of the phase ripple is dependent on the number of ripples which occur over a frequency range of interest. Group delay takes this into account since it is the differentiated phase response. Group delay is often a more easily interpreted indication of phase distortion.

The plot above shows that the same value of peak-to-peak phase ripple can result in substantially different group delay responses. The response on the right with the larger group-delay variation would cause more signal distortion.