Fractal Characteristics of Simulated and LMA-Detected Lightning Flashes
Blake J. Allen¹, Edward R. Mansell², and Eric C. Bruning³
⁰School of Meteorology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK
²NOAA / National Severe Storms Laboratory, Norman, OK
³Atmospheric Sciences Group, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
Corresponding author address: blake.allen@ou.edu

Abstract

The fractal dimension of lightning has been studied using both models and observations in the past, but both types of studies suffered from limitations that are now avoided. Due to a lack of computing power and model sophistication, the fractal dimension of simulated lightning has previously only been studied using either two-dimensional models or unidirectional three-dimensional (3D) models with extremely simplified charge distributions. Also, due to a lack of modern observing networks, previous studies of the fractal dimension of observed lightning were limited to analyzing photographs of flashes in which channels exited the cloud.

In this study, the fully 3D bidirectional lightning model of Mansell et al. (2002) has been used to simulate lightning flashes within a small, short-lived simulated storm with a realistic charge distribution. The model dynamics were run at 250m, while the lightning resolution was made as fine as 25m. The fractal characteristics of these flashes have been analyzed by calculating the correlation dimension using the method originally described in Grassberger and Procaccia (1983). In addition, the fractal characteristics of lightning flashes detected in 3D by the Oklahoma Lightning Mapping Array (OK-LMA) during a small central Oklahoma storm described in Bruning et al. (2007) have also been analyzed using the aforementioned method.

The simulated and observed flashes have been compared and the relationship between correlation dimension and model resolution has been analyzed and used to inform the tuning of parameters in the lightning model.

The Correlation Dimension

The fractal dimension of lightning produced by the model is similar to that of LMA-detected lightning, but the correlation dimension is very sensitive to model resolution. The results of the flash rate tests shown are preliminary and further testing needs to be done with other simulated storms, but these early results show that the equation found above may be useful as a way of setting the factor $\gamma$.

Application of Results to the Model

In addition to fractal dimension, model resolution affects flash rate. Also, both flash rate and fractal dimension are sensitive to the critical electric field threshold for propagation, $E_{crit}$, in the equation that governs the probability of adding adjacent points to the flash:

$$p_i(F) = \frac{1}{1 + (E_i - E_{crit})^\gamma}$$

$E_{crit}$ is held constant in the model, but its effective value can be varied by setting the factor $\gamma$ to a value between 0 and 1. The correlation dimension data from this study may be useful for specifying this value (see plots below).

Conclusions

The fractal character of lightning produced by the model is similar to that of LMA-detected lightning, but the correlation dimension is very sensitive to model resolution. The results of the flash rate tests shown are preliminary and further testing needs to be done with other simulated storms, but these early results show that the equation found above may be useful as a way of setting the factor $\gamma$. 

References


Acknowledgements

This work was funded by NSF grant ATM-0138359. The lead author also wishes to thank Sean Crowell for multiple discussions regarding ideas on how to fit lines to the data in this project.

Correlation Dimension Results

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<th>Data Set</th>
<th>Correlation Dimension</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Number of Flashes</th>
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</thead>
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<td>31.25m model run</td>
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<td>35.71m model run</td>
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<td>LMA</td>
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</table>

Below left: a.) Log-log plot of C(r) vs. r for the LMA flash (left) and modeled flash (right). The Solid red line corresponds to a linear least squares fit over the scaling region of each flash. b.) Semi-log plot of forward-differenced slopes between each point vs. r for the LMA flash (left) and modeled flash (right). In all plots the dashed gray lines denote the fractal scaling regions of the flashes where the fits were performed.

Below right: The total number of lightning flashes in the original model runs (red, with $f = 1$ for all resolutions), and in the runs with $f$ varied as discussed above (blue).

Example LMA Flash

Example 25m Model Flash

Above: Spatial plot of source points from an LMA-detected flash (left) and a modeled flash (right). Blue source points occurred the earliest in the flash and red points occurred the latest.