

Seeking sprite–induced signatures in remotely sensed middle atmosphere NO₂

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The local chemical impact of sprites is investigated for the first time. This study is motivated by the current understanding of the streamer nature of sprites: streamers are known to produce NO_x, thus sprites are expected to lead to a local enhancement of the background abundances, and possibly impact ozone. We adopted the following strategy: middle atmosphere MIPAS/GMTR NO₂ satellite measurements were correlated with ground-based WWLLN detections of large tropospheric thunderstorms as a proxy for sprite activity. We found no evidence of any significant impact at a global scale, but an indication of a possible sprite induced NO₂ enhancement of about 10% at 52 km height in correspondence with active thunderstorms. This local enhancement appears to increase with height from a few percent at 47 km to tens of percent at 60 km.

1. Introduction

Wilson [1925] predicted that electrical discharges commonly observed in the troposphere could also occur tens of kilometers above thunderstorms. Only in 1989, middle atmosphere discharges, or transient luminous events (TLEs), were first accidentally observed with a video camera [*Franz et al.*, 1990], stimulating more than two decades of very intense research [e.g. *Neubert*, 2003; *Füllekrug et al.*, 2006]. Among the TLE family are red sprites, huge discharges extending from 40 to 90 km height, tens of kilometers wide and lasting a few tens of millisecond at most. Sprites are associated with intense thunderstorm activity, and are mainly produced by quasi electrostatic Joule heating induced by positive cloud to ground (+CG) lightning discharges [*Pasko et al.*, 1997]. Close-up images and high speed video recording [see e.g. *Cummer et al.*, 2006] show sprites are typically initiated at about 75 km and develop upwards as a diffuse halo and downwards as streamers.

Because of the similarity with other ionizing processes (e.g. aurorae or tropospheric lightning), it has been suggested that sprites may produce reactive NO_x and odd HO_x, thus possibly impacting ozone. The persistence of optical features and occasional reactivation of sprites support the possibility of an impact on the background chemistry [*Stenbaek-Nielsen et al.*, 2000]. However, due to major difficulties in detailed modeling and in direct observations of sprite chemical changes, to date no estimate of the chemical impact of sprites has been published.

The major constraints in the observational study of sprite chemistry are the height of the events and the limited samples available. At a global rate of about 3 sprites per minute [*Ignaccolo et al.*, 2006], the likelihood of a coincidence between sprites and

available satellite middle atmosphere spectroscopic measurements is very small. Moreover, reference observations of sprites are from nighttime optical images obtained during field campaigns [e.g. *Arnone et al.*, 2007] of limited extent in time and space. The usability of electromagnetic measurements [e.g. *Rodger*, 2003] or infrasound signatures [*Farges et al.*, 2005] associated with sprites is as yet uncertain. The best proxy for sprite activity is thus the causative tropospheric +CGs which are globally detected.

In this paper we present the results of the first attempt to observe chemical changes induced by sprites.

2. Data and methodology

We used NO₂ measurements from the Michelson Interferometer for Passive Atmospheric Sounding [MIPAS – *Fischer et al.*, 2007] instrument on board ESA ENVironmental SATellite (ENVISAT). MIPAS is a limb-scanning Fourier Transform spectrometer recording emission spectra in the mid-infrared, 680 to 2410 cm⁻¹, with spectral resolution of 0.035 cm⁻¹ FWHM, unapodized. Global coverage is assured by 14.3 daily orbits, each with observations at about 10.00 am and 10.00 pm local time. In the adopted standard mode, one orbit consists of 72 limb-scans, each recording 17 observations at tangent altitudes between 6 and 68 km. MIPAS instantaneous field of view (IFOV) is 3 km in height and 30 km in longitude. In latitude, i.e. along the line of sight crossing the atmosphere below 80 km, the IFOV footprint is about 1200 km at 52 km height, and 500 km at 60 km height. NO₂ was retrieved adopting the new Geo-fit Multi-Target Retrieval (GMTR) algorithm [*Carlotti et al.*, 2006]. Unlike common single profile methods, GMTR performs a 2-dimensional retrieval of a whole orbit that makes it possible to model the horizontal

inhomogeneity of the atmosphere. NO₂ was retrieved at the end of the cascade of all retrieval main targets, following a multi-target retrieval for p, T, H₂O and ozone. The random errors are about 0.5 ppbV (about 5%) in volume mixing ratio (VMR) at 52 km, which is a factor 2 to 4 lower than standard retrievals.

We used lightning data as a proxy of sprite activity, reported by the World Wide Lightning Location Network [WWLLN – *Rodger et al.*, 2006]. The network exploits the electromagnetic power radiated into the very low frequency radio band (3–30kHz) by strong lightning discharges. WWLLN detects only a few percent of the worlds lightning strokes, corresponding to those with the largest peak currents. Even though a direct correlation with sprites would require information about the polarity and the charge moment of the lightning discharge, the proxy adopted identify the regions with the highest likelihood of sprite activity. In fact, WWLLN has been shown to detect nearly all lightning producing storms [*Jacobson et al.*, 2006]. For the time period of our MIPAS–WWLLN comparison, WWLLN consisted of 11 stations, with a global detection efficiency of 1% which was strongly biased towards the Maritime Continent and away from the strong chimney regions in central Africa and the Americas.

NO₂ was studied in the period August to December 2003, when both MIPAS/GMTR and WWLLN data were available. We used nighttime measurements of NO₂ because of the long persistence of possible sprite perturbations in the absence of photochemistry. Moreover, at night NO is promptly converted into NO₂, so that nighttime NO₂ is an excellent proxy for NO_x. The correlation between MIPAS measurements and intense lightning activity was obtained by integrating the number of WWLLN lightning strokes recorded

within a coincidence window. The window was shaped according to the MIPAS IFOV footprint and located around the geolocation of the NO₂ measurement; for consistency, we adopted a 30 km×500 km IFOV footprint for all heights. The period included in the integration was up to 60 minutes prior to the NO₂ observation. An NO₂ measurement was considered in coincidence with intense lightning activity (and thus high likelihood of sprite activity) if the integrated WWLLN lightning strokes number passed a threshold of 10 events per coincidence window. We call these NO₂ measurements WWLLN-NO₂ to distinguish them from background NO₂ (i.e. all available night NO₂ measurements).

We considered NO₂ measurements over narrow latitude bands of 5° (MIPAS meridional resolution) to avoid including latitudinal changes. We detrended all available measurements within the selected band using a 100-points (100 satellite passes, about one week) running mean, and studied the NO₂ anomalies (i.e. difference to the running mean). The threshold of 10 lightning strokes was the best choice to minimize spurious correlations when considering individual latitude bands. Once all bands were studied together, the signal to noise increased and we could lower the threshold to a less conservative 5 lightning strokes.

We also considered a first order effect of transport due to horizontal winds: we performed a second analysis where the coincidence window was translated upwind along a linear backward trajectory obtained adopting zonal and meridional winds from ECMWF operational analysis [Uppala *et al.*, 2005]. We refer to this latter correlation as “dynamical” correlation, to distinguish it from the former “static” correlation.

3. Results and discussion

Sprites are typically observed over the tropics and mid latitudes where intense lightning activity occurs. However, during 2003, the mid latitudes were partly affected by the strong high latitude winter NO₂ variability induced by downward transport of thermospheric NO_x and solar proton events. We thus focused over the tropics to maximize our chances to identify possible sprite-induced signatures. Inspection of global NO₂ (see Fig. 1a) showed no evidence of a correlation with high lightning activity, e.g. over land or in correspondence of the overall WWLLN detections (Fig. 1b – black). This suggests sprite perturbations have no significant impact at global scale (or give at most a zonally-smoothed contribution) and need to be analyzed at a local level.

3.1. NO₂ anomalies over a narrow latitude band

Figure 2 shows the results of the analysis performed for nighttime NO₂ at 52 km over the 5°N–10°N latitude band. This latitude band had the best combination of high number of MIPAS measurements and WWLLN coincidences. The 52 km height was chosen as best compromise between best quality of the measurement (at and below 52 km) and highest expected sprite impact (roughly above 50 km height). The time series of background NO₂ VMR (Fig. 2a – black, 1542 measurements) show average absolute values of about 10 ppbV and a standard deviation about the running mean of 1.5 ppbV. Random errors on a single measurement are 0.5 ppbV. WWLLN-NO₂ (Fig. 2a – red, 14 measurements) were calculated with a static coincidence window over a period of 60 minutes prior to MIPAS observations. The window was twice as wide (along longitude) as the MIPAS IFOV footprint to partly account for uncertainties and transport, and the light-

ning stroke threshold number was 10. This high lightning threshold implies that we are considering only thunderstorms with intense lightning activity, and thus high likelihood of sprite occurrence.

All WWLLN-NO₂ fall within the main range of background NO₂, thus suggesting a possible sprite impact no larger than background variability. However, the WWLLN-NO₂ shows a tendency to be above the trend (red line). We detrended the selected sample (Fig. 2b) and analyzed the distribution of the anomalies about the running mean (Fig. 2c). The WWLLN-NO₂ distribution shows a positive displacement of about +1 ppbV (about +10%) compared to the background NO₂. A bootstrap statistical analysis of the two distributions was performed showing that the risk of statistical coincidence is 1%. The difference is thus statistically significant.

No vertical transport could bring about changes in middle atmosphere NO₂ within tens of minutes from enhanced tropospheric lightning activity. The NO₂ enhancement must thus be due to in situ production, or by retrieval artifacts. The former interpretation would require middle atmosphere processes associated with tropospheric lightning activity which current knowledge identifies as sprites. We discuss the latter unlikely possibility in Sec. 3.3.

Repetition of the analysis over other latitude bands (see red dots in Fig. 1b for the geolocation of all WWLLN-NO₂) showed a lack of consistency of the displacement: out of 4 latitude bands where we had an acceptable number (≥ 10) of WWLLN-NO₂ coincidences, 2 showed a positive enhancement of +1 ppbV, one no change, and one a negative displacement of -0.4 ppbV. This lack of consistency is not unexpected since not all light-

ning is associated with sprite activity. On average a sprite may occur every 1000 lightning flashes [Ignaccolo *et al.*, 2006]: given that in 2003 WWLLN detected 1–2% of the world strongest lightning, and the threshold of 10 lightning strokes we imposed, one could expect one sprite every 2 WWLLN-NO₂ coincidences, further reduced by about a factor 2 accounting for geolocation uncertainties. However, rather than a one-to-one correlation, the selected WWLLN data should be interpreted as strong thunderstorm activity, implying high likelihood of sprite occurrence. Figure 1b confirms all WWLLN-NO₂ (red dots) are located over thunderstorm regions. To increase the numbers of our statistics, we analyzed the overall distribution of these anomalies over the tropics.

3.2. Overall distribution of NO₂ anomalies over the tropics

The distributions of NO₂ anomalies over all individually detrended 5 degrees latitude bands in the range 30°S to 20°N was calculated. WWLLN-NO₂ were obtained integrating over time-windows of 10, 20, 30 and 60 minutes prior to the MIPAS observation and a threshold of 5 lightning strokes. Figure 3 shows the results of the overall distribution of NO₂ anomalies in the range 30°S to 20°N for the 20 minutes time-window static correlation, at 60, 52 and 47 km height. In the 52 km case, the dynamical correlation distribution is also shown (Fig. 3b – red).

At 52 km height (b), the overall static WWLLN-NO₂ distribution (gray line) shows an asymmetry compared to the background NO₂ (shaded). The displacement in the mean value observed in the 5N–10N case is not present any more (both the mean and the median are shifted by only + 0.05 ppbV). Any possible sprite perturbation thus falls within the background variability. However, there is a pronounced peak at about +1 ppbV in the

WWLLN-NO₂ distribution, which is in agreement with enhancements observed within the single narrow bands. The peak is at values larger than the random error of the retrieval (0.5 ppbV) so it is well resolved. This peak persists when increasing the time-window to 30 minutes and fades at 60 minutes (not shown) when transport processes may become too important to be neglected.

The dynamical case (Fig. 3b – red line) takes into account a first order transport due to horizontal winds. We analyzed the lightning activity (proxy of sprite activity) at upwind locations from where NO₂ perturbations may have been transported to the location of the observation during the time-window. Because of the linear approximation adopted for the backward trajectories, one expects an improvement only over short time scales. Interestingly, we find that the dynamical WWLLN-NO₂ distribution increases its asymmetry with a more pronounced peak at +1 ppbV, differentiating more significantly from the background NO₂ distribution. The WWLLN-NO₂ anomaly distribution has now a mean of +0.2 ppbV and a median of +0.5 ppbV which confirms the change induced by considering sources of sprite activity at a more realistic geolocation. Increase of the time-window to 30 and 60 minutes (not shown) leads to weaker differences with the static case. However, the peak at +1 ppbV is still (just) visible in the 60 minutes dynamical case.

These results suggest that a significant fraction of all WWLLN-NO₂ coincidences (possibly 15–20%) show an enhancement of about +1 ppbV compared to background NO₂, i.e. a +10% change. This fraction is roughly compatible with the expected number of coincidences deduced from the sprite to lightning occurrence ratio discussed above.

At 47 km (Fig. 3c) the distribution is more compact and symmetric, possibly because of the higher background NO₂ VMR absolute values. The WWLLN-NO₂ anomaly distribution shows a peak at about 0.5 ppbV, peak that decreases to a few tenths of ppbV at 42 km (not shown). At 60 km height (Fig. 3a), the background NO₂ distribution loses compactness, and so does the WWLLN-NO₂ distribution. However, the WWLLN-NO₂ seems to show stronger NO₂ enhancements, which is confirmed by a median of +0.9 ppbV against a background median of -0.1 ppbV. The strongest enhancements reach +8 ppbV which is 8 times larger than the most common background values. At 68 km height the retrieved NO₂ is not meaningful. Part of the NO₂ anomalies in coincidence with lightning activity (and thus sprite activity) seems to be biased towards a range of higher NO₂ values. This increase of the NO₂ enhancement with height is compatible with an expected sprite signature: fewer sprite events extend below 50 km height compared to 60 km height and above.

3.3. Robustness of the analysis

To investigate the robustness of our results we performed a series of Monte Carlo tests. Firstly, a bootstrap simulation showed that the risk of coincidence of the background NO₂ and the WWLLN-NO₂ 52 km distribution is about 5%. Secondly, in order to minimize the differences to the real case, we further produced *fake* lightning activity by shifting the dates of the real one, thus maintaining the original spatial and temporal characteristics. No physical correlation with NO₂ is possible with the fake dataset. Repetition of the complete analysis for 100 fake distributions showed that positive peaks of similar magnitude could be randomly reproduced in about 30% of the cases. This is not unexpected since the peak

falls within the background variability. However, only in 8 fake distributions, the 52 km peak increases its magnitude applying backward trajectories, and only in 1 fake case a consistency of the dynamical case and the static case at the three heights was found.

We also performed a series of tests on the possible cloud contamination on our retrieval, and found that no change in the retrieved NO₂ occurs when clouds at various heights are considered. Independent radiative transfer simulations of the dependence of vertical profiles on the presence of clouds confirm that no change occurs above 20–25 km [*H. Sembhi*, personal communication], thus far below our retrieved NO₂ (42 to 68 km height).

4. Conclusions

In order to find possible sprite-induced NO_x changes, we studied nighttime satellite measurement of NO₂ at 50–60 km height in coincidence of strong tropospheric lightning activity. We found no global impact, but a local enhancement in NO₂ is coincidence with intense lightning activity of about +10% at 52 km height visible as a well defined peak within the background variability. Consideration of transport processes leads to a better defined peak at the same magnitude of the enhancement, while the latter increases with increasing height, from a few percent at 47 km to tens of percent at 60 km. A Monte Carlo test showed this consistency could be found only in one out of 100 cases.

Our analysis points towards a local sprite effect upon the composition of the neutral atmosphere, with a more robust evidence in the band 5–10°N. These results are consistent with the ion-chemistry modeling estimates we present in a companion paper [*Enell et al.*, 2008, accepted manuscript]. However, due to the small numbers of our analysis and the

small magnitude of the changes, an extension of the analysis to a larger dataset is needed to confirm these results.

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Figure 1. Mean nighttime NO₂ at 52 km height by MIPAS (a) and WWLLN lightning activity (b: black = detections between 21 and 22 local hour; red = WWLLN-MIPAS coincidences) for the period August to December 2003.

Figure 2. a) MIPAS single measurements time series (black = nighttime background NO₂, red = nighttime NO₂ in coincidence with WWLLN lightning activity – WWLLN-NO₂) within the latitude band 5°N to 10°N and at 52 km height; b) NO₂ anomalies time series (trend removed); c) distribution of NO₂ anomalies (the WWLLN-NO₂ in red is scaled by a factor 0.2). See text for details.

Figure 3. Global distribution of NO₂ anomalies over the region 30°S to 20°N (shaded = NO₂, gray line = WWLLN-NO₂), with static coincidence window of 20 minutes and 30 km×500 km. Measurements are for heights a) 60 km, b) 52 km and c) 47 km. At 52 km height the dynamical correlation case is superimposed (red).





