

**A sun-tracking
method to improve
the pointing accuracy
of weather radar**

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A sun-tracking method to improve the pointing accuracy of weather radar

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Abstract

Accurate positioning of data collected by a weather radar is of primary importance for their appropriate georeferencing, which in turn makes it possible to combine those with additional sources of information (topography, land cover maps, meteorological simulations from numerical weather models to list a few). This issue is especially acute for mobile radar systems, for which accurate and stable levelling might be difficult to ensure. The sun is a source of microwave radiation, which can be detected by weather radars and used for the accurate positioning of the radar data. This paper presents a technique based on the sun echoes to quantify and hence correct for the instrumental errors which can affect the pointing accuracy of radar antenna. The proposed method is applied to data collected in the Swiss Alps using a mobile X-band radar system. The obtained instrumental bias values are evaluated by comparing the locations of the ground echoes predicted using these bias estimates with the observed ground echo locations. The very good agreement between the two confirms the good accuracy of the proposed method.

1 Introduction

Georeferencing data collected by a weather radar is crucial for the accurate positioning of the processes of interest and for meaningful combination with other sources of data (e.g. topography, land cover, model simulations). Errors in the assumed values of the parameters defining the pointing of a radar have a strong influence on the final uncertainty in the actual location of the collected data. In the case of mobile radar systems, it is of particular importance because radars can be deployed in various (more or less difficult) geographical and climatic contexts. The precise levelling of the radar system may not be easy and can also degrade in time (due for instance to repetitive freeze/thaw or ground instability). In addition, there can be misalignment between the different components of the radar system like the antenna, the arms and the pedestal.

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to radar data collected in the Swiss Alps are presented in Sect. 4. Conclusions and perspectives are given in Sect. 5.

2 Positioning errors in radar systems

2.1 Similarities to the theodolite

5 In order to determine the position of the data in a given reference coordinate system, the pointing orientation of the electrical axis of the radar antenna has to be known as accurately as possible. It is relevant to emphasize the similitude between the way a radar system (using a mechanically steerable antenna) records the polar position of the data and the way a theodolite does it. Indeed both polar measurement systems are very similar, recording a horizontal angle A and an elevation angle E . An important step is the necessity to orientate the horizontal angles measured with respect to the cartographic or geographic North (depending on the system chosen for positioning the data). To this purpose, the angle A_0 between the zero horizontal index (the 0 deg azimuth from the radar) and the considered North direction is used. The theodolite and its operating details are well known for a long time by geodesists and land surveyors. For example Baeschlin (1945), Ollivier (1955) and Whyte (1969) describe the theodolite, in particular its instrumental systematic biases and their effects on horizontal and vertical angles that are measured. Most of these biases can be modeled and taken into account in the georeferencing process. Similarly to a theodolite, a weather radar system can usually observe a target in two different positions of the antenna (assuming that the elevation angle ranges from 0 to 180 deg). The first position (position 1 in the following) corresponds to elevation angles smaller than 90 deg. The second position (position 2 in the following) corresponds to elevation angles larger than 90 deg, i.e. it refers to the opposite side of the horizontal circle and the complementary value from 180 deg on the vertical circle with respect to position 1. This possibility enables the user to detect several instrumental errors which have an opposite effect with respect to

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the measurement position (e.g. horizontal collimation, the azimuthal component of the angle between the effective electrical axis and the geometrical pointing direction of the antenna).

2.2 Specificities of radar systems

The orientation of the electrical axis can be significantly different from the axis of the arms which is the reference for the angular measurement. This is often due to a mechanical imperfection at the interface between the antenna and the arm (problem possibly induced by the mounting/unmounting of the antenna). As a result, it is necessary to adapt the modeling proposed for the theodolite. Figure 1 presents the main instrumental pointing errors which will be considered in addition to A_0 in the present work. The possible horizontal and vertical excentricity of the electric axis will be supposed negligible.

Table 1 shows their effects on the angular measurements. The index error E_0 has to be distinguished from the vertical collimation error CV_0 that describes the difference for the vertical orientation between the axis of the arms and the electrical axis. The inclination of the principal axis, which should ideally be perfectly vertical, is modeled by two angles: β_0 represents the deviation between this axis and the vertical, and ω_0 the orientation of the inclination referred to the cartographic North. CH_0 stands for the horizontal collimation.

2.3 Atmospheric refraction

The elevation angle measured by a radar must be corrected for the possible effects of atmospheric refraction (Darlington et al., 2003; Huuskonen and Holleman, 2007). The model proposed by Doviak and Zrnić (1993) gives acceptable corrections in the troposphere depending on the atmospheric conditions (Gao et al., 2008). Nevertheless an other approach has to be considered in the case of solar measurements due to the fact that the sun signal crosses the entire terrestrial atmosphere.

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The refraction phenomenon can reach 1 deg for low elevation angles at X band (see Fig. 2). Considering that the desired accuracy for angular measurements of a radar system is about 0.1 deg (e.g. Huuskonen and Holleman, 2007), the influence of refraction must be taken into account. To do so, the atmosphere is supposed to be homogenous and stratified. For a standard atmosphere (“Mid Latitude Winter” or “Mid Latitude Summer”, see Kneizys et al. 1996), the refraction index is computed for 1000-m thick layers using the model MPM93 (Liebe et al., 1993). Finally, the Snell-Descartes law is applied and the calculation is repeated for the whole range of elevation angles needed. The resulting angular deviation due to refraction is plotted in Fig. 2.

3 The proposed sun-tracking method

3.1 Principle

This method is based on the classical positioning methods used by geodesists before the Global Positioning System (GPS) was available. Because of the microwave emission of the sun, its signature can be detected in radar data. Knowing the position of the sun and its corresponding record in the polar radar data, the corresponding deviation in azimuth (x_0) and elevation (y_0) can be computed. So during one day, the sun is tracked with successive scanning windows (15 deg \times 5 deg) alternatively in both positions of the antenna (see Fig. 3). For each scanning window, the local deviations are computed using the model proposed by Huuskonen and Holleman (2007). The scanning windows are defined so that the local deviations are monitored for a range of positions on the horizontal and vertical axes as large as possible in order to have more reliable instrumental error estimates.

3.2 Processing

Once the radial containing the sun echo has been detected and stored, the model proposed by Huuskonen and Holleman (2007) is applied to each scanning window.

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This model is based on the assumption that both the sun emission and the antenna energy pattern have a Gaussian distribution. Because of the conversion of power into dBm, this model takes a polynomial form:

$$p(x, y) = a_1x^2 + a_2y^2 + b_1x + b_2y + c \quad (1)$$

where $p(x, y)$ is the power measured by the radar (in dBm), x and y are the horizontal and vertical deviations (in deg) between the center of the sun and the electrical axis, and a_1 , a_2 , b_1 , b_2 and c are the parameters of the model. These parameters can be estimated by a general least-square technique (Gauss-Helmert for instance, see Grafarend, 2006).

From Eq. (1), the horizontal width Δ_A , the vertical width Δ_E , the horizontal deviation x_0 , the vertical deviation y_0 and the maximum solar power p_0 can be computed analytically (Huuskonen and Holleman, 2007):

$$\Delta_A = \sqrt{-\frac{40\log 2}{a_1}} \quad (2)$$

$$\Delta_E = \sqrt{-\frac{40\log 2}{a_2}} \quad (3)$$

$$x_0 = -\frac{b_1}{2a_1} \quad (4)$$

$$y_0 = -\frac{b_2}{2a_2} \quad (5)$$

$$p_0 = c - \frac{b_1^2}{4a_1} - \frac{b_2^2}{4a_2} \quad (6)$$

where log denotes the logarithm to base 10. The values of $(x_0, y_0, p_0, \Delta_A, \Delta_E)$ can be obtained analytically using Eqs. (2–6), once the the parameters (a_1, a_2, b_1, b_2, c) have been estimated.

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The second step consists in fitting the model that takes into account the effects of the most significant instrumental errors. This model is composed of 2 error equations relating the horizontal and vertical deviations to the instrumental biases, for the 2 antenna positions:

$$\varepsilon_{A,i} = \beta_0 \tan(E_j) \sin(A_i + \omega_0 + A_0) + (-1)^{i-1} \frac{CH_0}{\cos(E_j)} - A_0 - x_0 \quad (7)$$

$$\varepsilon_{E,i} = \beta_0 \cos(A_i + \omega_0 + A_0) + E_0 + (-1)^{i-1} CV_0 - y_0 \quad (8)$$

where i (1 or 2) indicates the considered antenna position. The “Gauss-Helmert” method is used to estimate the parameters A_0 , β_0 , ω_0 , CH_0 , CV_0 and E_0 from the observed $\varepsilon_{A,i}$ and $\varepsilon_{E,i}$ values, as well as the associated uncertainties.

If the radar does not have the ability to observe in both antenna positions, we see from Eq. (7) that A_0 , β_0 , ω_0 and CH_0 can still be estimated, while Eq. (8) shows that only $(E_0 + (-1)^{i-1} CV_0)$ can be estimated, but not any more E_0 and CV_0 separately.

3.3 Accuracy of the parameters

In order to properly quantify the instrumental errors, it is necessary that the accuracy of the local deviation estimates is significantly smaller than the considered errors. The first step in checking this concerns the quality of the sun ephemeris. The algorithm proposed by Grena (2008) provides an acceptable accuracy for the sun position in azimuth and elevation with a maximum error of about 0.003 deg from 2003 to 2023. In order to reach this accuracy, the geographic position (referred to WGS84 ellipsoid) of the center of rotation of the antenna has to be known with an error smaller than 0.001 deg (i.e. about 110 m). It must be noted that the vertical deflection can be non-negligible (i.e. larger than 0.001 deg), especially in mountainous regions, and in that case must be taken into account. This angle represents the difference at the same position between the true zenith, which is the reference for the astronomical measurements, and the normal to the reference ellipsoid considered for the ephemeris (Bomford, 1980).

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Concerning the error due to an imperfect estimation of the atmospheric refraction, it becomes negligible when observing only at high elevations (above 12 deg according to Fig. 2) because the influence of the refraction itself decreases below 0.1 deg. Overall, the accuracy of the inputs is sufficient to estimate the instrumental errors with the desired accuracy (0.1 deg).

3.4 Data acquisition

During data acquisition, it is more convenient to use the radar in receiving mode only. If this configuration is not available, it is still possible to adapt the acquisition configuration in order to reduce the unwanted effect of the ground and meteorological echoes, by extending the acquisition period and by shortening the pulse length. Collecting the sun signature during dry weather is the easiest way to avoid such adverse effects if the radar cannot work in receiving mode only. Finally, the scanning procedure has to be accurately synchronized in time to avoid additional uncertainty.

4 Application to radar data collected in the swiss Alps

4.1 Field campaign

Between September 2009 and July 2011, an X-band Doppler dual-polarization weather radar (named MXPol in the following) has been deployed near Davos, Switzerland, at about 2130 m of altitude (see Fig. 4). The principal technical parameters of the radar system are provided in Table 2. The radar is mounted on a trailer, which was levelled at the installation. But because of the difficult conditions (repetitive freezing/thaw of the terrain, variable load due to the amount of snow), the inclination of the principal axis of the trailer can change in time. This issue motivated the developpement of the proposed technique. In addition, the mountainous context results in a lot of ground echoes in the radar data, which will be used to evaluate the correction derived from the proposed

sun-tracking technique. To illustrate the capabilities of the proposed technique, radar data (sun signature) collected during 2 dry days in July 2010 are analyzed.

4.2 Results

Figures 5 and 6 present the evolution of the horizontal (x_0) and vertical (y_0) deviations between the theoretical position of the sun and the polar radar record as functions of the horizontal angle, for the two antenna positions. The instrumental errors are estimated by fitting (in the least-square sense) the models given in Eq. (7)–(8) to the observed horizontal and vertical deviations. The obtained values are listed in Table 3. Given these values and the associated uncertainties (quantified as the standard deviations of the respective parameter estimates), the instrumental errors appear to be significant, and in particular the horizontal and vertical collimation terms (CH_0 and CV_0) which cannot be estimated using sun-tracking methods previously published in the literature. The uncertainty associated with ω_0 is larger with respect to the others. This is explained by the geometrical function of this parameter which has a secondary impact on the result compared to β_0 . So ω_0 has a smaller influence on the final correction added to the raw measurements.

5 Evaluation using ground echoes

5.1 Principle

Because of the surrounding mountains, there are many ground echoes in the area covered by MXPoI (see Fig. 7). Considering the pointing parameters previously estimated, the detected ground echoes are projected in the Swiss planimetric (MN03) and altimetric (NF02) coordinate systems. Hence, the altimetric deviation with the Digital Elevation Model (DEM) provided by the Swiss Federal Office of Topography (Swisstopo) can be computed. Knowing the accuracy and the resolution of the DEM, the analysis of these

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differences makes possible the evaluation of the quality of the obtained instrumental error estimates. It must be noted that the possibility to get such a large number of ground echoes at various elevations is specific to this deployment in a mountainous context and is not frequent.

5.2 Data acquisition

The data acquisition is performed for both positions of the antenna and is composed of a set of horizontal scans. In order to make the result as sensitive as possible to any systematic bias (especially CH_0 because its influence directly depends on the elevation), ground echoes must be collected over a significant range of elevations. The acquisition lasted several hours in both positions. In the case of the Davos campaign, ground echoes were visible and significant from -1 to 8 deg in elevation and over a range larger than 180 deg in azimuth.

5.3 Creation of a DEM

The purpose of the post processing is to build from these raw data a DEM that can be compared with a reference one. Here, in the swiss context of Davos, the 25-m resolution DEM produced by the Swisstopo is taken as reference. The accuracy of this product has been tested by Swisstopo and the uncertainty does not exceed ± 5 m in the region around Davos (Swisstopo, 2004).

First, the recorded profiles which have hit the ground are detected by using a threshold which takes the decrease of radar power density with distance into account. The angle of incidence of the radar beam and the type of illuminated surface mainly contribute to the estimation of this threshold (e.g. Ulaby et al., 1986; Rees and Steel, 2001). The polar coordinates of those echoes are then transformed into the swiss projection system which is also used for the reference DEM. During this step, it is possible to correct the position of the ground echoes for the instrumental defaults estimated by the proposed sun-tracking technique. Finally, a grid similar to the Swisstopo one (cell size

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and positions) can be generated. A null value is affected to the cells which are not covered by any recorded ground echoes.

5.4 Results

As both DEMs have the same characteristics, they can be compared and it is possible to analyze the altimetric discrepancies between them in order to evaluate the quality of the estimates of the positioning parameters. Figure 8 presents the distribution of these deviations before and after correction of the positioning errors, for the 2 antenna positions. Figure 8 clearly shows that there is a large improvement when correcting the positioning errors, as indicated by the decrease in the mean difference of the altitudes between the 2 DEMs (from about 90 down to 5 m), as well as by the closeness of this mean difference (after correction) for the 2 antenna positions. There is in addition a clear decrease in the width of the distributions after correction.

To complement the analysis of the distribution of the difference between the 2 DEMs, the spatial correlation of this difference is also investigated by estimating its variogram (e.g. Chilès and Delfiner, 1999; Goovaerts, 2000). Figure 9 shows the experimental variograms before and after correction for the position 1 of the antenna (the results are similar for position 2). There is a significant decrease in the variogram values and in its slope after correction, indicating a much lower variability of the difference in altitude between the created and the reference DEM. By showing that the error is lower and is much less spatially correlated, the analysis of the variogram of the discrepancies between the 2 DEMS confirms the analysis of their distributions and the large improvement when using the corrected positioning parameters.

6 Conclusions

Weather radar monitor precipitation at long ranges. The accurate positioning of their measurements is hence of primary importance, in particular for the combination with

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other sources of information. Various sources of error can bias the positioning of the radar, and a new method to correct for these sources of error is proposed in the present article, taking advantage of the similarities between radar systems and theodolites (commonly used for a long time in land surveying) as well as of the fact that the sun is a source of microwaves.

In addition to the errors in azimuth and elevation, which are usually identified in previously proposed methods, the positioning errors due to the possible misalignment of the electrical axis with the geometrical axis of the antenna can be quantified. The proposed method is tested on data collected in the Swiss Alps using a mobile X-band radar. The mountainous context enables the creation of a radar digital elevation model, which can be compared to a reference one in order to evaluate the quality of the positioning correction. The large improvement in the agreement between the 2 DEMs shows the reliability of the proposed correction method.

This method is simple and can be applied to fixed or mobile radar systems. The main limitation is the need to follow the sun over a large range of elevation angles to obtain reliable estimates of the different error parameters.

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Table 1. Modeling of the non-negligible instrumental biases.

| Bias | Effect on the bearing | Effect on the elevation | Removal |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------|
| Incl. of principal axis | $\beta_0 \tan(E) \sin(A + A_0 + \omega_0)$ | $\beta_0 \cos(A + A_0 + \omega_0)$ | – |
| Horiz. collimation | – | $\pm \frac{CH_0}{\cos(E)}$ | 2 pos |
| Vert. collimation | – | $\pm CV_0$ | 2 pos |
| Index err. (vert. circle) | – | E_0 | – |

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Table 2. Principal technical parameters of the MXPol radar.

| Parameter | MXPol |
|------------------|-----------------|
| Frequency | 9.41 GHz |
| Polarization | Sim. H and V |
| 3-dB beam width | 1.45 deg |
| Range resolution | 15–150 m |
| Manufacturer | ProSensing, USA |

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Table 3. Estimated values of the instrumental biases affecting MXPol during the campaign in the Swiss Alps.

| Bias | Estimate [deg] | Uncertainty [deg] |
|------------|----------------|-------------------|
| A_0 | 300.94 | ± 0.012 |
| E_0 | 0.38 | ± 0.011 |
| β_0 | 0.23 | ± 0.008 |
| ω_0 | 271 | ± 2.6 |
| CH_0 | 0.207 | ± 0.006 |
| CV_0 | 0.57 | ± 0.009 |

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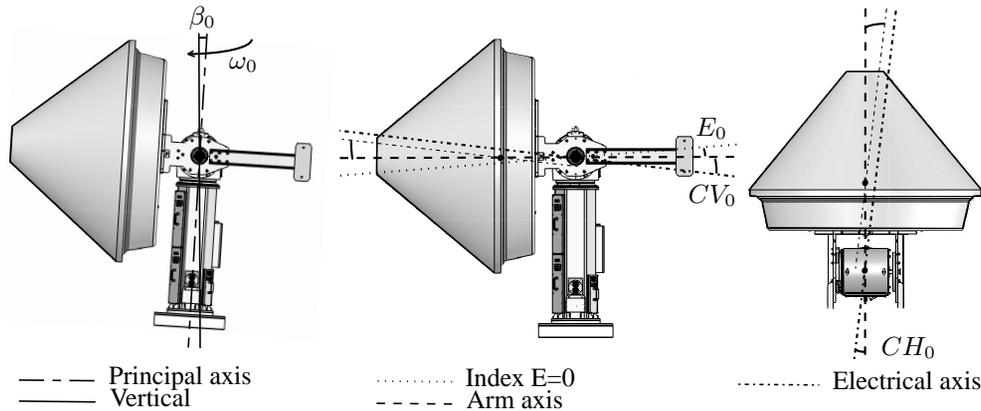


Fig. 1. Main instrumental errors: inclination of the principal axis (β_0 , ω_0), collimation errors (CH_0 and CV_0) and the index default affecting the vertical circle (E_0). The antenna drawing has been kindly provided by Prosensing Inc.

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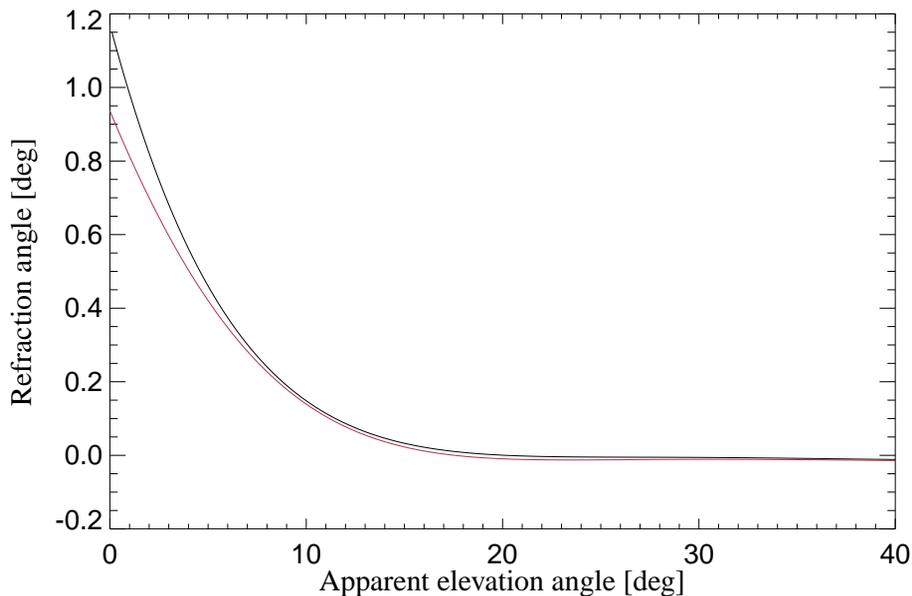


Fig. 2. Refraction model. In black: Mid Latitude Winter, in red: Mid Latitude Summer.

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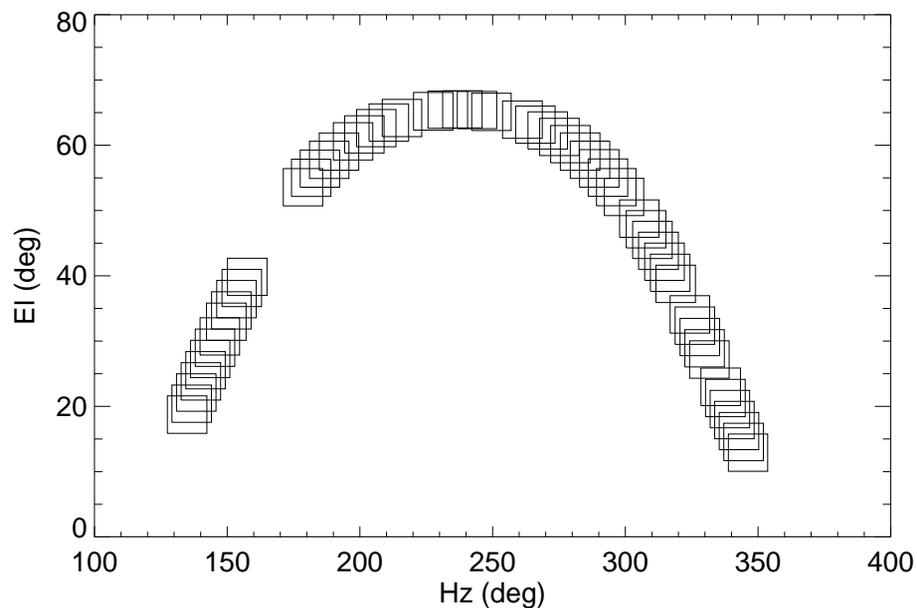


Fig. 3. Successive sun-tracking windows for position 1.

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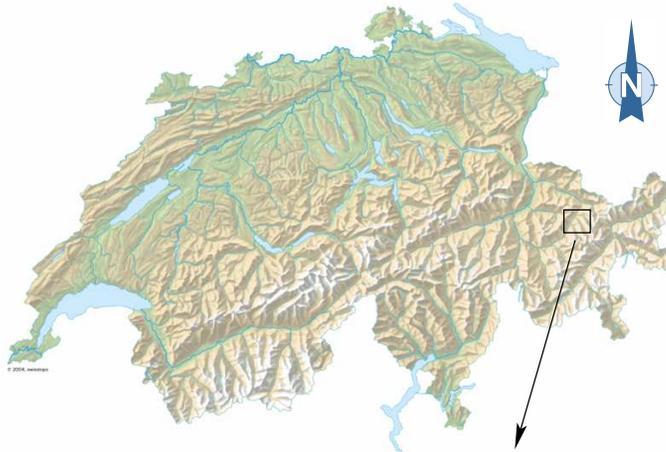


Fig. 4. Radar deployment in Davos (Switzerland). SwissTopo has provided the map of Switzerland in the upper panel.

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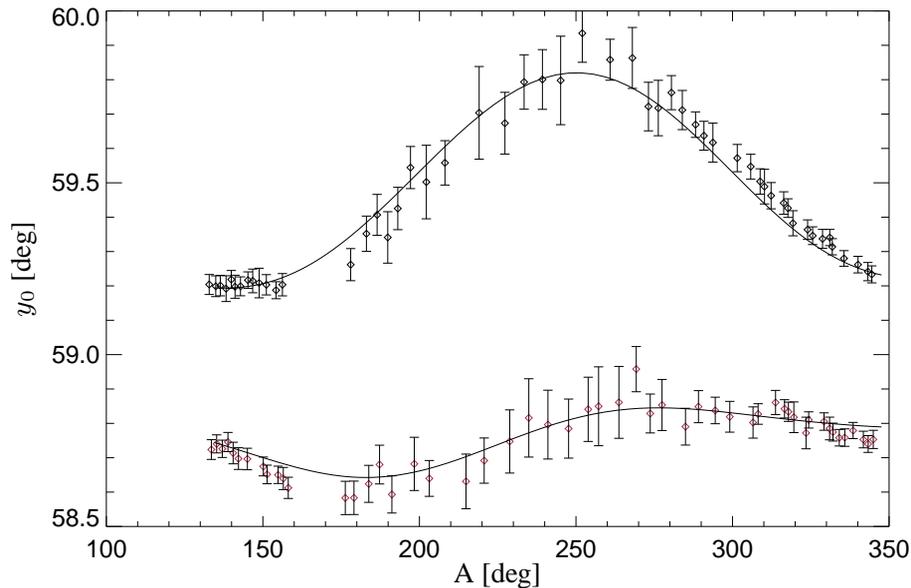


Fig. 5. Horizontal local deviations evolution with respect to the horizontal angle. The upper points correspond to position 1 of the antenna, the lower points to position 2. The error bars figure the 99 % confidence interval.

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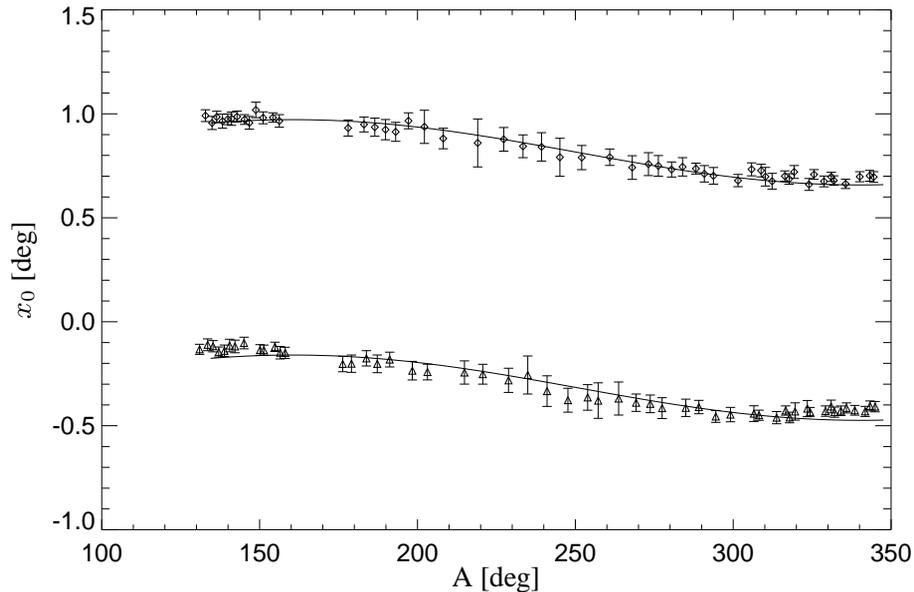


Fig. 6. Vertical local deviations evolution with respect to the horizontal angle. The upper points correspond to position 1 of the antenna, the lower points to position 2. The error bars figure the 99% confidence interval.

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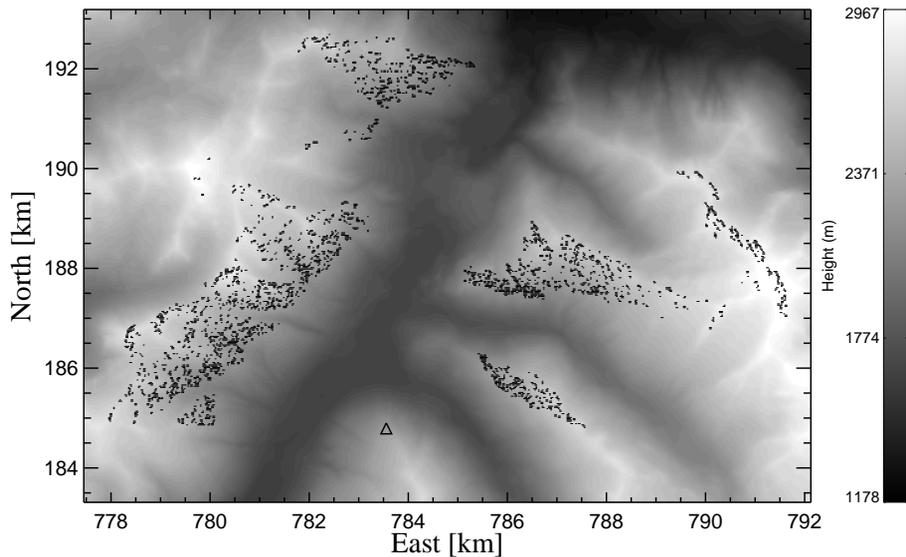


Fig. 7. Projected ground echoes, superimposed on the DEM provided by Swisstopo (Swiss projection system MN03). The radar location is indicated by the triangle.

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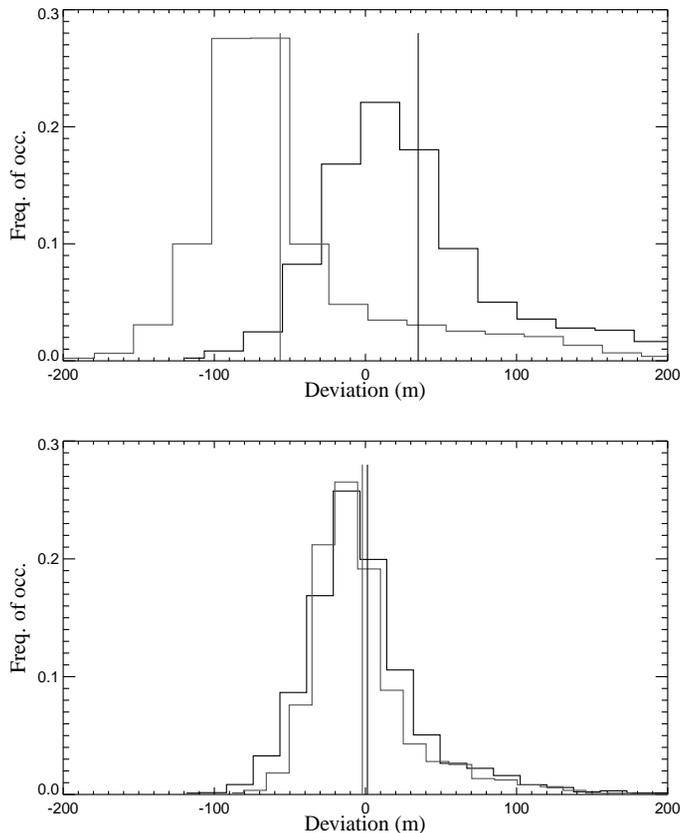


Fig. 8. Histogram of the altimetric deviations between the projected ground echoes and the reference DEM provided by Swisstopo: before pointing correction (top) and after (bottom). The solid line corresponds to position 1, the dotted line to position 2. The vertical bars indicate the mean values.

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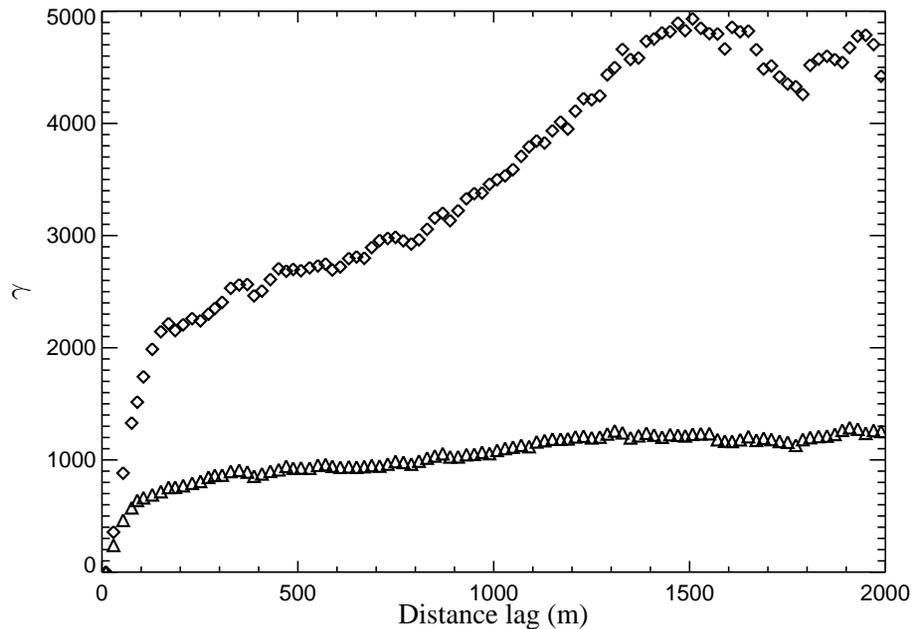


Fig. 9. Results for position 1: variogram of the deviation with respect to the reference DEM: before pointing correction (diamonds) and after (triangles).

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