

Interactive comment on *Multiscale estimation of the field-aligned current density* by

Costel Bunescu et al.

Anonymous Referee #2

Received and published: 14 August 2018

5 1 Summary

The authors describe a technique which aims to disentangle the characteristics of FACs present in the auroral region at multiple scales. The scheme is a development of earlier work by (Bunescu et al., 2015) and uses analysis of pre-processed magnetic field data with sliding windows at multiple scales to conduct analysis on observed disturbances in the time domain, using MVA to calculate characteristics such as current sheet orientation and to ultimately identify the relative contributions of various scales to make up a FAC system. The system is tested first on simple simulated FACs and then on real data observed using the Swarm satellite mission.

2 Major adjustments

The work on the revision of the manuscript prompted additional consistency checks, which helped us to understand better the results and limitations of the multiscale analysis, as well as to improve the computation and the interpretation of the MSMVA parameters. Among those, perhaps the main improvement is that $\partial_w \lambda_\eta$ does not simply provide the normal scale of the FAC sheet, but the crossing length along spacecraft track. In order to obtain the FAC thickness, one has to project this length onto the FAC normal. The correction of the scale information is done for all MSMVA quantities and for both scale sampling schemes, by assuming that the spacecraft track is essentially in northward direction, i.e., along the x axis of the MFA system. Basically, this correction is needed because the analysis is done in the MFA (x, y) frame, whereas thickness is defined in the FAC sheet (ξ, η) frame. In order to explain this behavior we added a paragraph at the end of section (2.3). In this paragraph we explain also that the amplitude of $\partial_w \lambda_\eta$ and the local FAC density have to be corrected as well for the dependence on thickness instead of the parameter w .

Following this adjustment, we decided to include also a proper parametrization of the orientation in the synthetic data. The new FAC system from section (3.1) includes now orientations of 0° and 40° for the FD and FU FACs, respectively. The new results show the scale correction in all quantities. The amplitude corrected j_\parallel and $\partial_w \lambda_\eta$ show now the same amplitudes for the two FACs. The scale and amplitude correction of the multiscale parameters has also impact on the application of MSMVA to Swarm events. While the amplitude of j_\parallel was correctly computed for Swarm events, the scale correction was not applied in the submitted manuscript. Thus, all profiles of MSMVA quantities (Figures 6, 10, and 14) now contain correction of scales (i.e., adjustments in the respective abscissa values) and the various scales and orientations mentioned in the text for all Swarm events (sections (4.2), (4.3), and (4.4)) were changed accordingly. Note that the previous work by Bunescu et al. (2015) did not include tests on inclined FAC structures. Nevertheless, the results of Bunescu et al. (2015) are still fine since the analysis was illustrated with east-west aligned synthetic FACs and also the application to measured data was done on essentially east-west aligned aurora.

Following the referees' comments we looked closer at the scale weightings of the local FAC density to obtain a global FAC density estimate. The conclusion is that the weighting concept is not mature enough to be applied to measured data. One option would have been to still keep the weightings for the synthetic data where we have a good reference FAC density (input FAC density) to compare with global FAC density (output of the weighting). However, such a setup, with weightings only for synthetic data, might still confuse the reader, who could wonder why the weighting is not applied also to measured data. We thus agree with the referees that the weighting is better suited to further work, oriented towards the reconstruction of the total FAC density. A paragraph was added at the end of section (2.4) to explain that we cannot simply integrate over scales to obtain a global FAC density and we also pointed out that proper scale weighting is needed because of the lack of orthogonality of the basis functions. As a consequence of removing the weighting, section (2.5) was removed and the manuscript was cleaned from the references to the weighting of FAC estimates. The associated changes are indicated by the green cuts through text in all

sections. The bottom panels in Figures 1 and 2 were removed. Also the two bottom panels in the left and right plots of Figures 5, 9, and 13 were removed.

Following the removal of the global FAC estimates (weighted FAC estimates) we compare the local multiscale FAC density, at the scale given by $\partial_w \lambda_\eta$ (assumed to dominate at a specific location), with single- and dual-spacecraft FAC estimates obtained at the same time/position. We added paragraphs to each section showing Swarm observations (sections (4.2), (4.3), (4.4)), where we compared the FAC estimates and quantified the differences percentage wise. For the synthetic data (sections (3.1), (3.2)) we compared the local multiscale FAC density with the input FAC density. We also updated two paragraphs from the conclusion section to indicate the agreement between the different FAC estimates and also the consistency of the linear and logarithmic scale samplings.

The previous version of the manuscript included two FAC estimates based on the dual-spacecraft methods, FD and LS FAC estimates. A more careful analysis showed that both FD and LS show basically similar FAC density estimates. The differences were caused, essentially, by the time tags assignment. Following discussion with the coauthors we decided to keep only the FD dual-spacecraft estimate in order to reduce the amount of information and panels in Figures 4, 8, and 12. Moreover, at the moment the dual-spacecraft LS estimate is not publicly available and the application of the dual-spacecraft LS technique to Swarm is not published. The associated changes are indicated by the blue cuts through text in all sections.

The revised manuscript includes the mapping of the optical frames to the geographic frame. This change leads to adjustments in the interpretation of the optical information. Thus, the paragraphs describing the optical data were updated accordingly for each Swarm event. For the event on 17 February 2015 the mapped optical data show that actually the southward auroral structure looks curled. For the event on 15 January 2015 we now clearly see a large scale auroral structure inclined by about 20° towards south, and small embedded auroral structures of different inclinations, rather east-west aligned. Also, for the last Swarm event the optical data are now more consistent with the results of the MSMVA analysis.

Section (2.6) was integrated into the discussion section, since we do not actually show comparisons with spectral techniques.

Finally, we found an error in the computation of $\partial_w \lambda_\eta$ for the logarithmic scale sampling scheme. This was caused by using the same code as for the linear scheme, where we have a constant discretization in the scale array, $dw=\text{const}$, whereas for the logarithmic scheme this is not the case. The results of the linear and logarithmic schemes show now a better consistency.

Various other corrections of the text were needed to better explain certain features or correct small errors. We hope that the revised manuscript is clearer, follows better the target of this work and avoids confusion on side subjects.

3 General Comments

The system performs remarkably well when tested on simulated data and I believe that the development path is a promising one – in particular the time domain nature of the method promises the potential of improved accuracy vs. frequency domain approaches. However when operating in the time domain, it is vitally important to somehow separate signals at various scales e.g. by zero-phase band-pass filtering. At the very least this direction should be explored and the results reported on.

The same concern was raised by Referee #1. We reproduce here the explanation included in the answer to Referee #1. The model functions implicitly employed to represent the magnetic field measurements are piece-wise linear functions of a certain length w , interpreted as the scale of the underlying current structure. The corresponding FAC density profile is a step function of the same width w , and centered at the same reference time t_{cen} . This approach is compatible with established FAC estimators based on finite differencing. Actual magnetic profiles in the auroral zone are quite similar to these underlying piece-wise linear model functions, at least closer than perfectly smooth functions such as the ones employed for producing the synthetic data in section (3) (which are preferred there because of analytic tractability). Hence, we assume that our FAC scalogram performs actually better on real data than on the synthetic examples. Nonzero correlations among different piece-wise linear model functions lead to the non-orthogonal behavior criticized by both referees. The overall implications, however, depend on the particular subset of model functions associated with the chosen sampling scheme: (a) If for a given scale w all available center times t_{cen} are used, model functions with neighboring t_{cen} are strongly correlated, resulting in a highly redundant and very non-orthogonal representation. This scale sampling scheme we call "linear". (b) If for a given scale w the chosen center times t_{cen} are separated by the scale w , the model functions are only weakly correlated, resulting in a representation that is much less redundant and closer to orthogonality. This scale sampling scheme we call "logarithmic". The underlying logic is the

same as for the Haar wavelet transform. By comparing the results of linear versus logarithmic scale sampling for synthetic data, one finds that localization of center time/location and scale is more accurate with the linear sampling scheme. In logarithmic sampling, the center location of a current structure is heavily constrained by the scale w that thus effectively represents the uncertainty of the $tcen$ (note also the uncertainty relation in wavelet analysis). Here our emphasis is on constraining FAC scales and center locations using a visualization tool, not on a full reconstruction of the FAC profile, thus we prefer to use a highly redundant set of model functions instead of an orthogonal and thus non-redundant one. Since the synthetic data are smooth profiles, and the scales are the widths of Gaussian profiles, we cannot expect that the piece-wise linear model functions identify the parameters perfectly. We updated the discussion section of the manuscript with this paragraph

As things stand and as evident in Figures 1 and 2, even when running the system on simple test inputs, without appropriately suppressing large scales, small-scale parameters such as variance, dB etc. will be dominated by whatever is happening at those large scales.

As detailed also in answer to Referee #1, we updated section (3) of the manuscript with a proper parametrization of the orientation. Sections (3.1) and (3.2) now describe more complex FAC structures that illustrate both the advantages and limitations of the MSMVA analysis. The superposition of FACs of different scales and orientations is considered. One can see that in this case both the scales and orientations are recovered with rather good accuracy, as described in the text (see also Report #1). The results of the analysis depend highly on the parameters of the superposed structures. Our numerical experiments indicate, not surprisingly, that the more intense FACs are characterized better. A more systematic study is needed to analyze the dependence of the results on the ratio of the relative intensities, scales, and orientations of the superposed structures. However, this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

As commented also in Report #1, we agree with the referee that filtering or isolation of a certain scale would improve the results at the respective scale. On the other hand, this would imply an a priori emphasis on that particular scale, which may introduce unwanted additional features. In particular, preprocessing/filtering (zero phase) is essentially a projection which distorts the interpretation and moreover the results depend on the type of filter and on the model functions.

A zero-level filtering is implicitly included in the MVA analysis. At each scale, the MVA analysis is performed and the FAC density is computed on a detrended perturbation obtained by extracting an average signal. Thus, a background perturbation, influence from large scales, is partially removed. A paragraph was added in section (2.3) to indicate this detrending procedure. As mentioned also in Report #1, an iterative scheme, that progressively removes the more intense FACs, may help overcoming the present limitations and the future improvement of the technique. A paragraph along this line was added at the end of section (3.2).

This is evidenced by the large error in calculated FAC in Figure 1 as the authors themselves admit to on page 11 lines 11-12 of the manuscript. When real data with multiple scales is analyzed (e.g. Figure 5) the FAC contributions at various scales appear to bleed into each other to such a degree that disentangling the contributions from various scales becomes very difficult. The bleeding is actually intrinsic for the current density, as illustrated e.g. by a uniform current sheet: current density remains constant for smaller scales than the sheet width and decreases to zero for larger scales. The current density panel provides just qualitative scale information, complementary to the more quantitative insight provided by the derivative of the maximum eigenvalue. At the end of section (3.1) we added comparison of the local multiscale FAC density with the input FAC density. We explained also the possibility to get the scale information from j_{\parallel} , indicated by a slight change of the slope of j_{\parallel} for the linear sampling scheme or a decrease in amplitude for the logarithmic scheme, at the scale of the FAC element. The comparison of the output with the input FAC density shows now a difference of just 10% for the linear scheme (after correcting the technique in several respects, as detailed above under 'Major adjustments'). As discussed in section (3.2), for more complex superposed structures now we get as well consistent results. Section (3.2) was updated accordingly (see also Response to Report #1).

The authors attempt to correct for this as far as FAC density calculations are concerned by using weighting factors. In my opinion this can be potentially dangerous as then there is a risk of pre-supposing assumptions.

The single- and dual-spacecraft techniques do not deconvolve the information about the FAC density. We introduced the weighting as a simple way to qualitatively check the consistency of the MSMVA results with the dual- and single-spacecraft estimates. As explained above (section 2 of this Report) we removed completely the weightings from the manuscript.

Ultimately, we still do not know which scales are relatively the most important – this is what the methodology is designed to find out. By forcing weightings on scales there is a risk of the method presupposing its own conclusions. It is true that with the

weighting factors the system does a good job of reconstructing the observed time series – however the aim is not to reconstruct the time series but to decompose them in a way that reflects the truth.

With the revisions and corrections detailed above, including elimination of weightings, the technique appears to perform pretty well, both on synthetic and observed data. FAC elements are correctly identified and their properties derived by MSMVA are in good agreement with expectations. For the synthetic data, the parameters fit well with the input data. For the Swarm observations, the planarity, scale, and orientation of the various FAC elements are found to agree with the conjugate optical data. Current density of the FAC elements (assumed to dominate at specific locations) is in general consistent with the Swarm FAC products (provided that scale limitations of these products are properly considered).

I would thus recommend a revision of the manuscript where some way of separating the scales, perhaps by selective zero-phase band-pass filtering, is carried out with the results reported on. I believe that simple additions such as these may greatly improve the system's capacity and look forward to seeing the results of the developments.

As detailed in the text (last para of Section 3.2) and in the Response to Report #1 (second last specific comment), including some filtering scheme may also result in unwanted effects. For the time being, we would rather apply the present (corrected and revised) procedure to more events, and leave the (iterative?) filtering for a later stage.

4 Specific comments:

Page 2 lines 3-4 “median of the scale distribution around 230 m in the range of fine and small scale auroral arcs (10 m – 1 km).” – please specify where the 10 m to 1 km numbers are from, since they do not appear to be present in the reference (the minimum scale in the reference is 70 m).

The referee is right, 10 m is now corrected to 70 m. A relatively recent review paper on the fine scale aurora with scales below 1 km (Sandahl et al., 2008) is now mentioned as well in the introduction.

Page 2 line 7 “large sampling frequency difference, maximum at about 25 Hz for TV and 0.3 Hz for ASI” – for clarification it would be sensible to add something to the effect of “as any arcs which did not exhibit quasi-stationarity at the exposure timescales would likely have had their optical signals smeared and integrated to appear as larger- scale structures”.

We added the sentence: “Note that arcs which are not quasi-stationary at the exposure timescales are likely to be smeared and integrated to larger scale structures in the optical data.”

Page 2 lines 12-13 “Overall, the results of all these studies indicate a rather continuous scale spectrum” it may be better to write “Overall, the results of all these studies together indicate a rather continuous scale spectrum” since some of the individual studies alone certainly do not seem to indicate that!

Adjusted.

Page 2 lines 23-24 “(Karlsson and Marklund, 1996) found a median scale of about 4.6 km for the diverging electric fields observed by Freja” – please specify where the referenced paper mentions that number, since I am unfortunately unable to find it

Thank you for checking. The value is taken from Johansson et al. (2007) (Figure 9) where the peak of the distribution is around 4 km. Text adjusted by the sentence: “Johansson et al. (2007) (Figure 9) compare also the scale distribution with former results.

We notice the distribution of the diverging electric fields observed by Freja with the peak around 4 km.”

Page 4 lines 1-2 “Gillies et al. (2015) pointed out that the single-spacecraft FAC density provides better identification of the boundaries of auroral patches.” – Is this “better” as compared to the dual-spacecraft FAC density? Please specify. As I understand this paragraph advocates for the need to analyse multiple scales including small scales which may not be well-captured by the dual-spacecraft method or indeed by the 1 Hz single-spacecraft FAC product. In this context a valuable reference to add would be Miles et al. (2018) who studied an intense discrete auroral arc crossing observed by Swarm and e-POP, the paper vividly demonstrates the limitations of both the dual spacecraft FAC density product and the small-tilt assumption when analyzing small- scale auroral structures.

The text was adjusted accordingly, including the reference to (Miles et al., 2018).

Page 5 lines 26-27 the authors state the Equation (3) was used for many single- spacecraft missions but then proceed to give only 1 reference (to Freja data). Please either amend the wording (e.g. “Equation (3) was used successfully to obtain partial estimates of the FAC density for some single-spacecraft missions”) or else add more references to where the single-spacecraft

product was used (e.g. Swarm).

Sentence adjusted by references to FAST and Swarm.

5 Page 5 line 21 “Thus, the cross-track separation defines the lower limit of the FAC scales” – authors should specify that the lower scale limit is in the cross-track direction. The scale limit in the along-track direction is determined by the inter-spacecraft along-track separation and the degree of quasi-stationarity of those FACs.

We rephrase the text to: “The cross-track separation defines the lower limit of the FAC scales in cross-track direction, whereas the limit in the along-track direction is determined by the along-track separation, provided that the FAC structure is quasi-stationary.”

10 Page 15 lines 5-6 (also Figure 4) – the origin of the time shift is explained fine but it is visually difficult to compare the two results with the time shift in place. I would recommend factoring it out so that the two estimates are overplotted directly and the differences can be more clearly seen.

15 For the first two events we recomputed the LS FAC density and assigned the time stamp correctly from SwA, similar to the way L2 product (FD estimate) is defined. For the last event (27 September 2014), the default L2 time stamp related to SwA was modified by shifting the FAC density with the computed time lag. The use of a common time stamp for both LS and FD dual-spacecraft FAC density estimates showed a high similarity of these estimates. Thus, we decided to remove the LS dual-spacecraft FAC density from the manuscript for the reasons mentioned above in section (2).

5 Technical corrections

Page 8 line 4 please close the 2nd bracket

Corrected

20 Page 15 line 27 “slightly” Please replace “associated to” to “associated with” (e.g. in lines 22-23 in page 1)

Corrected

6 Figures:

Please label the plots in the figures (a1, b1 etc. . . are described in the figure captions but are not actually labeled by the sides of the plots). In Figures 1, 2, 5, 9 and 13 planarity (on the y-axis) appears to be mis-labeled as ‘scale’ in the plots.

25 We have indeed mis-labeled panels (a) and (e). According to the suggestion of Referee #1 we relabeled the panels using unique letters. All the spectrogram panels show the respective quantities as a function of time/position (x axis) and scale (y axis). The panel with wrong y label was (e) and is now changed to ‘Scale [s]’. Another wrong y label, noticed by Referee #1 in panel (a) of Figures 5, 9, 13, is now corrected.

References

- Bunescu, C., Marghitu, O., Constantinescu, D., Narita, Y., Vogt, J., and Blăgău, A.: Multiscale field-aligned current analyzer, *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*, 120, 9563–9577, <https://doi.org/10.1002/2015JA021670>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/2015JA021670>, 2015.
- 5 Johansson, T., Marklund, G., Karlsson, T., Liléo, S., Lindqvist, P.-A., Nilsson, H., and Buchert, S.: Scale sizes of intense auroral electric fields observed by Cluster, *Annales Geophysicae*, 25, 2413–2425, <https://doi.org/10.5194/angeo-25-2413-2007>, <http://www.ann-geophys.net/25/2413/2007/>, 2007.
- Karlsson, T. and Marklund, G. T.: A statistical study of intense low-altitude electric fields observed by Freja, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 23, 1005–1008, <https://doi.org/10.1029/96GL00773>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1029/96GL00773>, 1996.
- 10 Miles, D. M., Mann, I. R., Pakhotin, I. P., Burchill, J. K., Howarth, A. D., Knudsen, D. J., Lysak, R. L., Wallis, D. D., Cogger, L. L., and Yau, A. W.: Alfvénic Dynamics and Fine Structuring of Discrete Auroral Arcs: Swarm and e-POP Observations, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 45, 545–555, <https://doi.org/10.1002/2017GL076051>, <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/2017GL076051>, 2018.
- Sandahl, I., Sergienko, T., and Brändström, U.: Fine structure of optical aurora, *Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics*, 70, 2275 – 2292, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jastp.2008.08.016>, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364682608002162>, transport processes in the coupled solar wind-geospace system seen from a high-latitude vantage point, 2008.
- 15