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Solar cycle properties described by simple convection-driven dynamos

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Abstract

Simple models of magnetic field generation by convection in rotating spherical shells exhibit properties resembling those observed on the sun. The assumption of the Boussinesq approximation made in these models prevents a realistic description of the solar cycle, but through a physically motivated change in the boundary condition for the differential rotation, the propagation of dynamo waves towards higher latitudes can be reversed, at least at low latitudes.

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(Some figures may appear in colour only in the online journal)

1. Introduction

A well-known difficulty in modeling the solar dynamo is the fact that the dynamo waves which describe the nearly time periodic dynamics of the magnetic field tend to propagate from lower to higher latitudes instead in the opposite sense as observed on the sun. This effect is well known in mean field models of the solar cycle, see, for example, Stix (1976a, b), but is also observed in numerical solutions of convection-driven dynamos in rotating spherical fluid shells, which are supposed to model processes in the solar convection zone. This and other shortcomings are caused by the inadequate representation of the compressibility of the solar atmosphere. Even using the huge power of modern supercomputers, it is not yet possible to resolve adequately the dynamics of convection in the presence of the large density variation between the bottom and the top of the solar convection zone and to model appropriately the dependence of density on pressure.

In their early direct numerical models of solar convection and magnetic field generation, Gilman and Glatzmaier (1981) assumed the Boussinesq approximation in which the fluid is regarded as incompressible except in connection with the gravity term where the temperature dependence of density is taken into account. This approximation eliminates the need for a separate equation of state and leads to a system of equations describing long period processes while the short period acoustic modes no longer enter the analysis. The same effect is obtained in the anelastic approximation in which the horizontally averaged density variation is taken into account, but the fluctuating component of density is still only represented in the gravity term. For applications of the anelastic approximation in models of the solar convection zone, see Gilman and Glatzmaier (1981) and Elliott et al (2000).

Convection in rotating spherical fluid shells heated from below is always associated with a differential rotation generated by the Reynolds stresses of convection. An analytical model demonstrating the preference of banana-shaped convection cells girdling the equator and the associated solar-like differential rotation was presented by Busse (1970, 1973). While the analytical solution for stress-free boundaries exhibits a depth-independent differential rotation, differential rotation decreasing with depth is always found in fully nonlinear numerical models. This property together with the fact that the differential rotation reaches its maximum at the equator is responsible for the propagation of the dynamo waves towards higher latitudes (Yoshimura 1975).

The solar differential rotation also decreases with depth throughout most of the convection zone with the exception of the tachocline region near its bottom and a region near...
its surface as indicated in figure 1(b). There is no general agreement about the origin of the upper 30 mm deep layer in which the differential rotation increases with depth. Here we assume that it is caused by supergranular convection that is characterized by a strong asymmetry between rising hot plasma and descending cool plasma. This type of convection has been modeled by hexagonal convection cells in the presence of rotation (Busse 2007). As shown in this paper the asymmetry between rising and descending flow in hexagonal convection cells does indeed generate a differential rotation that increases with depth. We use this dynamical property of convection as a motivation to modify the usually assumed stress-free boundary condition. Solely for the differential rotation we apply the condition given below in expression (11). The resulting profiles shown in the example of figure 1(a) are still not very solar-like, but show an increase with the depth of the differential rotation in the upper layer and tend to generate more solar-like behavior in the numerical simulations, as discussed in section 3.

2. Mathematical formulation of the model

Because convection-driven dynamo solutions strongly depend on the Prandtl number $P$ and on the magnetic Prandtl number $P_m$ for values of the order of unity and because even bistability has been found in this parameter range (Simitev and Busse 2009) we use a numerical model with a minimum number of external parameters as outlined below. In this way it is possible to cover a relevant parameter region in sufficient detail. In addition to the two Prandtl numbers and the parameter $\beta$ introduced below in the boundary condition (11), only the rotation parameter $\tau$ and the Rayleigh number $R$ must be specified.

We consider a spherical fluid shell rotating about a fixed axis described by the unit vector $\hat{k}$. It is assumed that a static state exists with the temperature distribution

$$T_S = T_0 + \Delta T \eta r^{-1}(1 - \eta)^{-2},$$

where $r$ denotes the distance from the center of the spherical shell measured in terms of multiples of the shell thickness $d$ and $\eta$ denotes the ratio of the inner to the outer radius of the shell. $\Delta T$ is the temperature difference between the two boundaries. The gravity field is given by $g = -d\gamma r$. In addition to $d$, the time $d^2/\nu$, the temperature $v^2/\gamma d^4$ and the magnetic flux density $v(\mu \varrho)^{1/2}/d$ are used as scales for the dimensionless description of the problem, where $v$ denotes the kinematic viscosity of the fluid, $\kappa$ its thermal diffusivity, $\varrho$ its density and $\mu$ its magnetic permeability. The equations of motion for the velocity vector $\mathbf{u}$, the heat equation for the deviation $\Theta$ from the static temperature distribution and the equation of induction for the magnetic flux density $\mathbf{B}$ are thus given by

$$\partial_t \mathbf{u} + \nabla \mathbf{u} + \tau \mathbf{k} \times \mathbf{u} = -\nabla \pi + \Theta \mathbf{r} + \nabla^2 \mathbf{u} + \mathbf{B} \cdot \nabla \mathbf{B}, \quad (1)$$

$$\nabla \cdot \mathbf{u} = 0, \quad (2)$$

$$P(\partial_t \Theta + \mathbf{u} \cdot \nabla \Theta) = (R \eta r^{-3}(1 - \eta)^{-2}) r \cdot \mathbf{u} + \nabla^2 \Theta, \quad (3)$$

$$\nabla \cdot \mathbf{B} = 0, \quad (4)$$

$$\nabla^2 \mathbf{B} = P_m(\partial_t \mathbf{B} + \mathbf{u} \cdot \nabla \mathbf{B} - \mathbf{B} \cdot \nabla \mathbf{u}), \quad (5)$$

where $\partial_t$ denotes the partial derivative with respect to time $t$ and where all terms in the equation of motion that can be written as gradients have been combined into $\nabla \pi$. The Boussinesq approximation is assumed in that the density $\varrho$ is regarded as constant except in the gravity term where its temperature dependence, given by $\alpha \equiv -(\partial \varrho / \partial T)/\varrho = \text{const}$, is taken into account. The Rayleigh number $R$, the Coriolis number $\tau$, the Prandtl number $P$ and the magnetic Prandtl number $P_m$ are defined by

$$R = \frac{\alpha \gamma \Delta T d^4}{\nu \kappa}, \quad \tau = \frac{2 \Omega d^2}{\nu}, \quad P = \frac{v}{\kappa}, \quad P_m = \frac{v}{\lambda},$$

respectively, where $\lambda$ is the magnetic diffusivity. Because the velocity field $\mathbf{u}$ as well as the magnetic flux density $\mathbf{B}$ are
Figure 2. Approximately half a period of a dynamo oscillation in the case \(\tau = 2000, R = 120000, P = 1, P_m = 4\) and \(\beta = 1.5\). The first column shows meridional lines of constant \(B_r\) on the left and poloidal field lines, \(r \sin \theta \partial h/\partial \theta\), on the right. The second column shows lines of constant \(\partial g/\partial \theta\) at \(r = 0.9\) corresponding to \(-0.9, -0.8, -0.7, 0.7, 0.8\) and \(0.9\) of its maximum absolute value, and the third column shows lines of constant \(B_r\) at \(r = r_0\). The last column shows \(\text{Re}(\partial g_m/\partial \theta)\) on the left and \(\text{Im}(\partial g_m/\partial \theta)\) on the right. The five rows are separated equidistantly in time by \(\Delta t = 0.0224\).

solenoidal vector fields, the general representation in terms of poloidal and toroidal components can be used:

\[
\mathbf{u} = \nabla \times (\nabla v \times r) + \nabla w \times r,
\]

\[
B = \nabla \times (\nabla h \times r) + \nabla g \times r.
\]

Equations for \(v\) and \(w\) are obtained by the multiplication of the \(\text{curl}^2\) and of the \(\text{curl}\) of equation (1) by \(r\). Analogously, equations for \(h\) and \(g\) are obtained through the multiplication of equation (5) and of its \(\text{curl}\) by \(r\).

No-slip boundary conditions are used at the inner boundary and stress-free conditions are applied at the outer boundary, while the temperature is assumed to be fixed at both boundaries,

\[
v = \partial_r v = w = \Theta = 0 \quad \text{at} \quad r = r_i \equiv \eta/(1 - \eta),
\]

\[
v = \partial_r^2 v = \partial_r (w/r) = \Theta = 0 \quad \text{at} \quad r = r_o \equiv 1/(1 - \eta).
\]

Only the value \(\eta = 0.65\) is used in the present paper. An exception to the stress-free boundary at \(r = r_o\) will be
Figure 4. Nearly half a period of a dynamo oscillation in the case \( \tau = 2000, R = 140000, P = 1, P_m = 3.5 \) and \( \beta = 1.0. \) The first column shows meridional lines of constant \( B_\phi \) on the left and poloidal field lines, \( r \sin \theta \partial h / \partial \theta \), on the right. The second column shows contour lines of the horizontal magnetic field \( (B_\phi^2 + B_\theta^2)^{1/2} \text{sgn}(B_\phi) \) at \( r = 0.9 \) corresponding to \(-0.9, -0.8, -0.7, 0.7, 0.8 \) and \( 0.9 \) of its maximum absolute value, and the third column shows lines of constant \( B_r \) at \( r = r_o \). The last column shows \( \text{Re}(\partial g^{\text{asym}} / \partial \theta) \) on the left and \( \text{Im}(\partial g^{\text{asym}} / \partial \theta) \) on the right. The four rows are separated equidistantly in time by \( \Delta t = 0.0168. \)

assumed for the axisymmetric part \( \overline{w} \) of \( w \),

\[
\partial_r (\overline{w}/r) = -\beta \overline{w}/r. \tag{11}
\]

For the magnetic field, electrically insulating boundaries are assumed such that the poloidal function \( h \) must be matched with the function \( h^{(e)} \), which describes the potential fields outside the fluid shell

\[
g = h - h^{(e)} = \partial_r (h - h^{(e)}) = 0 \quad \text{at } r = r_i \quad \text{and at } r = r_o. \tag{12}
\]

The numerical integration proceeds with the pseudo-spectral method as described by Tilgner (1999), which is based on an expansion of all dependent variables in spherical harmonics for the \( \theta, \varphi \)-dependences, i.e.

\[
v = \sum_{l,m} V_l^{(m)}(r, t) P_l^{(m)}(\cos \theta) \exp(im \varphi), \tag{13}
\]

and analogous expressions for the other variables, \( w, \Theta, h \) and \( g \). Here \( P_l^{(m)} \) denotes the associated Legendre functions. For the \( r \)-dependence, expansions in Chebychev polynomials are used. For the computations to be reported in this paper, a minimum of 41 collocation points in the radial direction and spherical harmonics up to the order of 128 have been used.

The magnetic energy density components of dynamo solutions are defined as

\[
\begin{align*}
\overline{M_p} &= \frac{1}{2} \langle | \nabla \times (\nabla \overline{h} \times r) |^2 \rangle, \\
\overline{M_t} &= \frac{1}{2} \langle | \nabla \times (\nabla \overline{g} \times r) |^2 \rangle, \\
\tilde{M_p} &= \frac{1}{2} \langle | \nabla \times (\nabla \tilde{h} \times r) |^2 \rangle, \\
\tilde{M_t} &= \frac{1}{2} \langle | \nabla \tilde{g} \times r |^2 \rangle,
\end{align*}
\]

where \( \langle \cdot \rangle \) indicates the average over the fluid shell and \( \overline{h} \) refers to the axisymmetric component of \( h \), while \( \tilde{h} \) is defined by \( \tilde{h} = h - \overline{h} \). The corresponding kinetic energy densities \( \overline{E}_p, \overline{E}_t, \tilde{E}_p \) and \( \tilde{E}_t \) are defined analogously with \( v \) and \( w \) replacing \( h \) and \( g \).

3. Simple convection-driven dynamos

In choosing parameter values for a numerical solar model, the task is most easily accomplished in the case of \( \tau \) since only a value of the (eddy-)viscosity must be chosen. Using a commonly accepted eddy viscosity of the order of \( 10^8 \text{ m}^2 \text{ s}^{-1} \) (Gilman 1983), we find \( \tau \approx 2 \times 10^3 \). It is more difficult to select an appropriate range for the Rayleigh number. We shall consider values that exceed the critical values for the onset of dynamo action by less than a factor of two. Otherwise, convection motions become too chaotic and the structures of
to drift in a solar-like fashion from higher latitudes to nearly confine to one meridional hemisphere while the other hemisphere is almost field free.

The solar evidence for a non-axisymmetric magnetic field is provided by the phenomenon of active longitudes (see Usoskin et al. (2007) and references therein). As in the case of those longitudes, the field shown in the third column of figure 2 hardly propagates throughout the time frame of the figure. The angular velocity of the prograde propagation of the pattern is less than 2π in dimensionless units, which is similar to the propagation of the convection pattern. In contrast to the cyclical nature of the magnetic field, the convection pattern is
nearly steady as indicated in figure 3. Individual convection columns may sometimes break up in that the outer part tends to propagate slightly faster than the inner part, which essentially remains steady in the rotating frame.

In figure 4, half a magnetic cycle is presented for a higher Rayleigh number than in the case of figure 2. As is evident from the third column of figure 4, the structure of the magnetic field is not antisymmetric with respect to the equatorial plane. In the southern hemisphere the $m = 2$ component of the magnetic field dominates in this particular cycle. At other times, patterns that are more antisymmetric and similar to those shown in figure 2 are found. The amplitude of the magnetic field varies strongly from cycle to cycle as shown in figure 5, while the amplitude of convection exhibits rather small variations.

It is tempting to present visualizations similar to the famous butterfly diagrams of solar cycles that have recorded observations of sunspots for many decades. Since we associate the occurrence of sunspots with the strength of the horizontal component of the magnetic field in the sun near the surface, the amplitudes of the maximum values of the horizontal components could be plotted as a function of latitude and time. But this procedure could not be realized due to limitations of data storage. Instead we have restricted attention to the main contribution to the azimuthal component of the magnetic field. Thus, in the top panel of figure 6 the extremal azimuthal component of the magnetic field corresponding to the wave numbers $m = 0$ and $m = 1$, i.e. $B_\phi + |B_\phi|^{m-1}|\text{sgn}(B_\phi)|$, is plotted as a function of time and latitude. In contrast to solar butterfly diagrams, the movements towards lower latitudes. The latter are only visible in the form of streaks at lower latitudes. For comparison the same quantity, but with $m = 1$ replaced by $m = 2$, has been plotted in the bottom panel of figure 6. The similarity between the two plots indicates that the time and latitude dependence of the extremal values of $B_\phi$ can approximatively be captured in this way.

In addition to butterfly diagrams based on sunspots, also butterfly diagrams based on observations of the radial component of the magnetic field are often used. In the middle panel of figure 6, a theoretical butterfly diagram is shown where $B_\phi + |B_\phi|^{m=1}|\text{sgn}(B_\phi)|$ has been plotted as a function of time and latitude. A comparison of the top and the middle panels of figure 6 indicates a noticeable phase shift between the two diagrams, which agrees roughly with the well-known observation that the radial component of the solar magnetic field changes its sign near the maximum of the solar cycle (Stix 1976a, 1976b).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt is made to explore the extent to which the operation of the solar dynamo can be understood on the basis of a minimal, but physically consistent, convection-driven dynamo model. Although the Boussinesq approximation is a highly unrealistic assumption in the case of the sun, the convection columns are similar to those found in numerical simulations based on anelastic models; see, for instance, Brun et al (2004) and Ghizaru et al (2010). Although there is little solar evidence for this type of convection, it is generally believed to exist as ‘giant cells’ in the deeper region of the solar convection zone.

The structure of the magnetic field found in our simulations differs substantially from the commonly assumed structure of the solar magnetic field dominated by a strong axisymmetric toroidal component. When the evidence for this traditional view is examined, however, it is found that observations do not contradict fields dominated by $m = 1$ or $m = 2$ components such as those shown in figures 2 and 5. In contrast, the presence of active longitudes on the sun indicates at least that components with the azimuthal wavenumbers $m = 1$ and $m = 2$ play a significant role.

A more detailed exploration of the parameter space of our minimal model is likely to reveal an even better correspondence with solar observations.

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