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Selecting stable extragalactic compact radio sources from the permanent astrogeodetic VLBI program

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Abstract. A set of stable compact radio sources is proposed, based on the analysis of VLBI-derived time series of right ascensions and declinations from mid-1989 through May 2002. Five selection schemes are tested, that are based on the usual and Allan standard deviations and on apparent drifts. The efficiency of the selection schemes is characterized by the ability of the sources to support the maintenance of the direction of the axes of the celestial reference frame that they materialize. When compared with the current set of ICRF defining sources, the best performing selection scheme keeps 199 sources and lowers the medium-term frame instability from 28 to 6 microarcseconds. ⋆

Key words. Quasars – Astrometry – Reference systems

1. Introduction

The permanent astrogeodetic VLBI observing program started in the 1980s as a joint effort of several institutions, sponsored mainly by the US National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). After undergoing development and international extension, it is now managed by the IVS (International VLBI Service for Geodesy and Astrometry). Astrogeodetic VLBI is currently the only available technique to monitor the irregular Earth's rotation at the required level of accuracy. It will stay so in the foreseeable future, as no competing technique is proposed. This program provides the basis for the monitoring of the IAU-recommended International Celestial Reference Frame (ICRF, Ma et al. (1998); see also IERS (1999) for the ICRF-Ext.1) to which other celestial reference frames, e.g. the Hipparcos catalogue, are referred.

At the end of 2002, over three million observations of more than 700 compact extragalactic radio sources have been accumulated. This data set includes extremely uneven observation rates. However, about half of the objects are well enough monitored so that the medium and long term stability of their directions can be investigated.

The observed objects are selected by the IVS among quasars and galaxy nuclei that are compact when observed in the X-band (4 cm) and S-band (13 cm) with baseline lengths extending to several thousands kilometers. However, when observed at the current level of precision (a fraction of milliarcsecond, mas), no object is really pointlike. Apparent motions, if existing, may be related to the existence of jets originating in the sources. While the background source structure is assumed to stay fixed, quasi periodical oscillations may exist, as well as apparent drifts that are unlikely to continue indefinitely, but with time characteristics that are not well known.

This observational situation may come into contradiction with the basic assumption that, *globally*, the set of selected object has a no net rotation relative to the quasi inertial space. However, little is presently known about the actual behaviour of these hundreds of sources, so that the solution to solve this difficulty appears to be the selection of sources that best match the no-motion model, in order to minimize the uncontrolled global rotation. The authors of the ICRF (Ma et al. 1998) set up three classes of sources, using qualitative and quantitative criteria, such as apparent drift, formal uncertainty of the global coordinates over 1980-1995, source stucture index. They used only the sources they considered as the most reliable (the *defining* sources) for the definition of the ICRF orientation. A second set of apparently reliable sources that had not been well enough observed in 1995 were considered as *candidates*. Finally, the remaining sources, considered as unstable, were labelled *other* sources.

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⋆ Table 6 is only available on-line @EDP