

The variability of Betelgeuse explained by surface convection

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Received ...; accepted ...

ABSTRACT

Key words.

1. Introduction

Betelgeuse is a prototypical red supergiant (RSG) known to be a semi-regular variable. Several periods can be found in the literature usually clustered around the so-called long secondary period (LSP) of 2000 days, and other shorter periods of 400 and 200 days. The origin of the LSP remains poorly known, some tried to explain the LSP by the lifetime of the large convective cells present at the surface of RSG (e.g Stothers (2010)) or by the magnetic field (Wood et al. 2004). The shorter periods of 400 and 200 days seem to have a different origin than the LSP. By studying a large sample of RSG, Kiss et al. (2006) attributed the 400 days period to radial pulsation modes, the 200 days period being attributed to the first overtone (Joyce et al. 2020), which was in agreement with the historical work of Stothers (1969).

Besides radial pulsation, surface activity leading to random brightness variation was also mentioned to explain the variability of Betelgeuse, being firstly theorised by Schwarzschild (1975). Betelgeuse is known to present large convective cells with lifetimes in the order of one to two years (López Ariste et al. 2018) and measurable changes in the span of one week. Bright convection cells near disk center will increase the integrated brightness of the star when compared with other situations where such cells are found near the edges. So even without calling for the formation of dust or other changes in opacity, one may argue that the simple evolution of convective patterns of the star may create a variability. Such variability could be expected to be random, but will present quasi-periodicities related to the typical time scales of the convective patterns.

At the end of 2019, Betelgeuse reached a historical minimum in its luminosity, called the great dimming (Guinan et al. 2020). From interferometric data, it is speculated that this event was caused by a cloud of dust close to the line of sight (Montargès et al. 2021). Interferometric images show a drop in luminosity in the southern hemisphere of Betelgeuse, that might be caused by a mass loss event and leading to this dimming (Dupree et al. 2022). Other theories such as a drop in temperature was also mentioned by Harper et al. (2020), or an increase in the molecular opacity (Kravchenko et al. 2021). In this event it was clear that a change in brightness was not due to any kind of pulsation but to a change on the brightness distribution over the stellar disk. Since the end of the Great

Dimming event, Betelgeuse has continue its random variation of brightness. Interestingly, it has been shown by Jadlovský et al. (2023) and Dupree et al. (2022) that the periodicity of Betelgeuse has changed after the dimming. Using the light curves from AAVSO, the authors showed that before the dimming, the dominant period of Betelgeuse was the 400 days period, while after the great dimming the main periods of Betelgeuse have shortened, oscillating between 97 days and 230 days (Dupree et al. 2022), revealing a change in the behaviour of the atmosphere of Betelgeuse. While the great dimming may be seen as a singular event, it brings up the question whether all changes in brightness cannot be due to similar changes in the brightness distribution over the disk, unrelated to any pulsation phenomenon. Our interest in an alternative explanation of the variability in terms of convective patterns arose. In order to address this question we shall seek for such typical periods of 400 and 200 days in observational proxies related to the convective activity.

Linear polarization in the atomic lines of the spectra of Betelgeuse, discovered by Aurière et al. (2016), has been interpreted as the joint action of two mechanisms. First the depolarization of the continuum by atoms which absorb linearly polarized light and re-emit unpolarized light, the continuum photons being polarized by Rayleigh scattering. This depolarization produces signals with an azimuth symmetry over the disk that would cancel out the net linear polarization on a homogeneous disk. Thus it must be combined with an inhomogenous disk to produce the net linear polarization signal observed. This interpretation suggested the possibility of mapping those brightness inhomogeneities. This has been done by López Ariste et al. (2018) even producing 3-dimensional images of the atmosphere of Betelgeuse (López Ariste et al. 2022) when taking advantage of the different height of formation of different lines in the spectrum of Betelgeuse. The images produced compare very well with contemporaneous images made with interferometric techniques (Montargès et al. 2016) and show clear convective patterns, akin to solar granulation.

Linear polarization observed in the atomic lines is therefore a proxy of convection, unrelated to radial pulsations but linked to the brightness inhomogeneities due to the convective patterns in Betelgeuse. If one can find the aforementioned periods in linear polarization, we must conclude that these periods are related to the convective activity which originates those linear polariza-

tion signals. This is the purpose of the present work. In section 2 we describe the dataset of linear polarization obtained with the TBL and the Lomb-Scargle periodogram used to derive periods. In section 3 we associate the 200 days period to convective timescale of the smallest granules and the 330 days periodicity to the largest granules, and we provide an explanation in the change of variability of Betelgeuse before and after the great dimming. In section 4, we sum up our work.

2. Searching for periodicities in the polarization spectra of Betelgeuse

Betelgeuse has been observed for the last 10 years with Narval and Neo-Narval at the Telescope Bernard Lyot (TBL). These two instruments measure the polarization over the visible spectra of Betelgeuse (390-1000 nm) with high spectral resolution ($R=65000$) and high polarimetric sensitivity. Despite this high sensitivity, the signal-to-noise ratios are not sufficient to measure the weak polarization signals in individual atomic lines of the spectrum. These amplitudes are today known to be of the order of 10^{-4} times the continuum intensity, and only exceptionally do they reach amplitudes of 10^{-3} the continuum. In these exceptional observations, enough photons can be accumulated per spectral bin to see the linear polarization signal above noise (Aurière et al. 2016). Most commonly, the amplitudes of linear polarization are below noise levels. In those occasions we have to add up the signals of thousands of lines to reduce the noise and increase the signal-to-noise ratios. This line addition is done through a technique called Least-Squares Deconvolution (LSD) (Donati et al. 1997) and assumes that the linear polarization signal is similar in all spectral lines up to scale factors in the sampling and amplitude. This technique has been successfully used in the past to measure magnetic field distributions over stellar surfaces and it is now used to produce images of the brightness distributions in the photosphere of Betelgeuse and other red supergiants as cited in the Introduction.

In this work we shall look into the signals produced through these line-addition techniques, and which produce a pseudo-spectral line in intensity and linear polarization which does not belong to any atomic species in particular but to an average of all of them present and emitting in the photosphere of Betelgeuse. After such procedures of line addition, these signals carry the coherent signals present in the photospheric lines, but the particularities of this or that spectral line are erased. All these data has been presented before by Aurière et al. (2016), Mathias et al. (2018) and López Ariste et al. (2022), which also give details on observing times and conditions as well as more detailed description on the data reduction.¹

2.1. The variability present in the stokes parameters

Trying to find periods in an astrophysical context carries the hurdle of unevenly spaced observed data. To overcome this issue, we used the Lomb-Scargle periodogram (Lomb 1976; Scargle 1982). For a given set of data, it fits sinusoidal using least-squares at each frequency between the first and the last observation. The better the fit, the higher the power attributed to the frequency. We applied this technique to the LSD profiles of Stokes I , U , Q and to the total linear polarization of Betelgeuse observed by the TBL during that span of 10 years.

¹ Beyond a 2-year proprietary embargo, and up to technical issues, all these data is available through PolarBase (<http://polarbase.irap.omp.eu/>).

We first computed the Lomb-Scargle periodogram at each wavelength of the LSD profile, between -25 km/s and +60 km/s to span the entire signal present in the LSD profile. López Ariste et al. (2018) found the most blueshifted signal towards -20 km/s, and interpreted it as the maximum velocity of the rising plasma, seen from the Earth. The most redshifted signal was found at +40 km/s. This velocity is interpreted as the rest velocity of the star in our reference frame. Seldom, signals at velocities larger than +40 km/s can be found and can be interpreted as either dark and cold plasma falling back to Betelgeuse, or to rising plumes of plasma located in the hidden face of Betelgeuse, and rising so high that they appear above the limb.

Figures 1,2,3 and 4 show the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the LSD profile of respectively the intensity, stokes Q , stokes U and the linear polarization. For each figure, the upper panel is the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of each velocity bin (black line) and the total average (red line). The green line corresponds to the window function. The lower panel is the Lomb-Scargle periodogram represented for each velocity bin, while the white dotted line refer to 400 and 200 days. The right panel is the mean profile of each stokes parameter for each velocity bin.

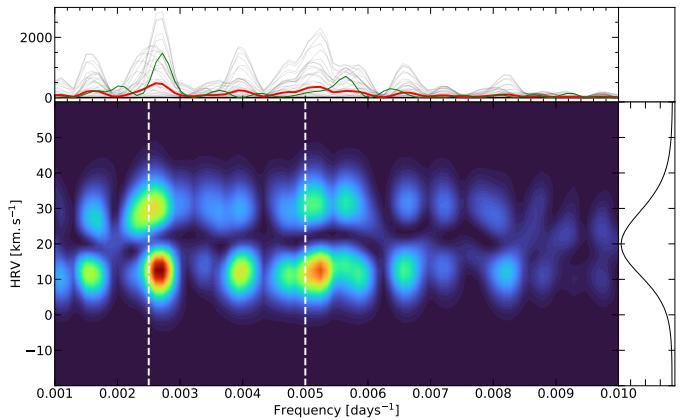


Fig. 1. Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the LSD profile of intensity. The upper panel is the Lomb-Scargle periodogram for each velocity bin (black line) and the average (red line). The green line is the window function. In the lower panel, the two white dashed lines represent respectively the 400 days and the 200 days periods. The right panel is the average intensity profile for each velocity bin.

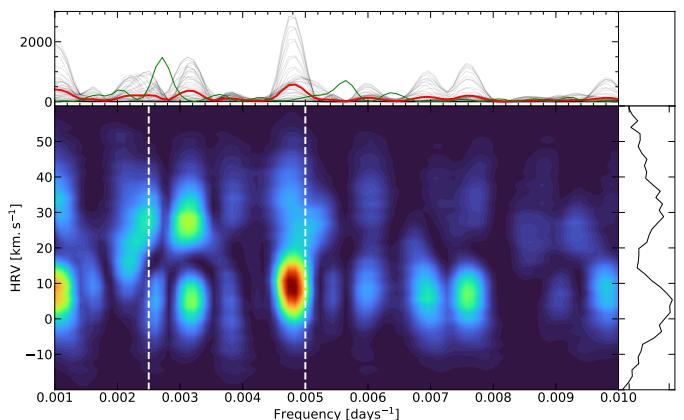


Fig. 2. Same as figure 1 for stokes Q .

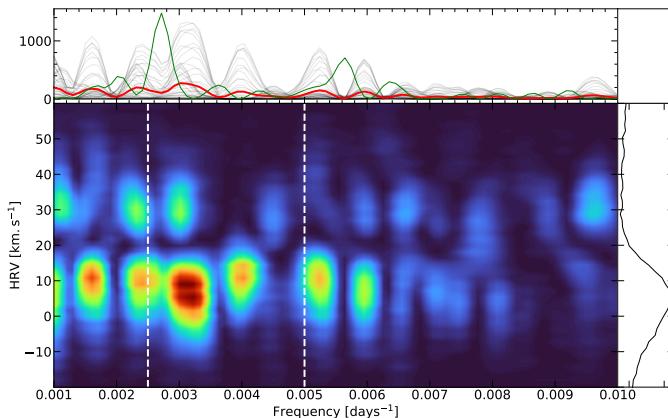


Fig. 3. Same as figure 1 for stokes U .

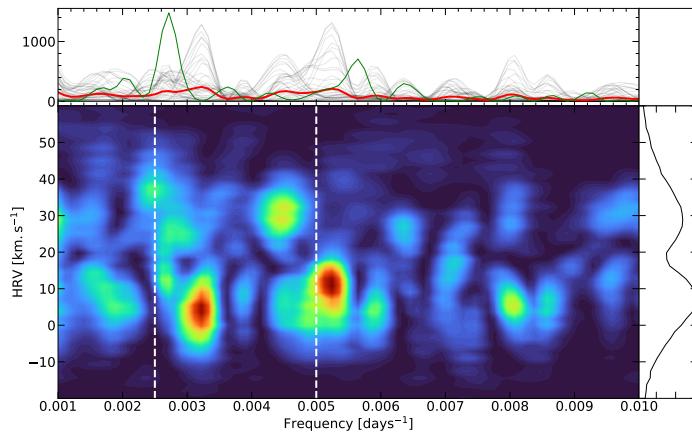


Fig. 4. Same as figure 1 for linear polarization: $\sqrt{Q^2 + U^2}$.

Figure 1 shows the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the LSD of the intensity profile. The 400 and 200 days period seem to be recovered by the periodogram. However, the 400 days period is uncomfortably close to the peak of the window function, while the 200 days period is not. We also notice that the two periods are present at the same HRV. Interestingly, Mathias et al. (2018) also found this 200 days periodicity with a shorter observation period.

Figure 2 and 3 show the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of both stokes Q and U . It is clear that the periodogram is completely different from the intensity one. A strong signal is present in fig. 2 around 200 days. Concerning stokes U in fig. 3, it appears that the main period is around 0.003 days^{-1} (330 days). Other period such as the one at 200 days or 250 days (0.004 days^{-1}) are present but difficult to trust. From stokes Q and U , we recover the 200 days period and the 330 days period is more or less close to the 400 days period found in the literature. Figure 4 shows the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the total linear polarization of Betelgeuse: $\sqrt{Q^2 + U^2}$. Interestingly, the periodogram shows a strong power at both 330 days and 200 days, which are the period that we have found in both stokes Q and U .

2.2. The variability of Betelgeuse inferred from polarimetry imaging

Using linear polarization, López Ariste et al. (2018) have been able to reconstruct images of Betelgeuse that have been successfully compared to interferometric images of Montargès et al.

(2016). The images are produced by finding the brightness distribution that better fits the observed linear polarization LSD profile using a Marquardt-Levenberg minimisation.

Betelgeuse is observed in average every two or three weeks by the TBL, and hence we are able to follow its surface activity through polarimetry imaging. This has allowed in the past the estimation of the size and the lifetime of the convective cells at the surface. From these images, we computed a photo-center, which is sensitive to the size and the number of convective cells. An homogeneous star will have a photo-center displacement coinciding with barycenter of the star, whereas a star with one or two huge convective cells will have a photo-center displacement more important, up to a few percent of the stellar radius in the case of red supergiants (Chiavassa et al. 2022).

Since the photo-center is linked to surface convection, it is worth checking for periods in its dynamics over the 13 years of observations of Betelgeuse at the TBL. Such periods will not be completely unrelated to the ones presented in the previous section, but will capture other aspects of the phenomena at work.

But, before going any further, we have to warn about the interpretation of such images. Linear polarization suffers from a 180° degree ambiguity already mentioned in Aurière et al. (2016). For that reason, our images can be rotated by 180° degree, and the brightness distribution will still fit the observed LSD polarization profiles. If a particular observation were to be treated independently of previous observations, the solution found by the algorithm could be any of the ambiguous solutions possible. To obtain a continuity between the series of images, for a given day we used the brightness distribution of the previous day as initial point of the fitting iteration; and for the first image, we start with a random brightness distribution as the beginning of the fit. Even though we are able to produce a series of images consistent with each other, it is important to keep in mind that the photo-center displacement computed from the series will be affected by the choice of the first image. To overcome this issue, we decided to compute the photo-center displacement from 100 different initial parameters and their subsequent series of images in an effort to recover from the ensemble properties that are independent of the choice of the first image.

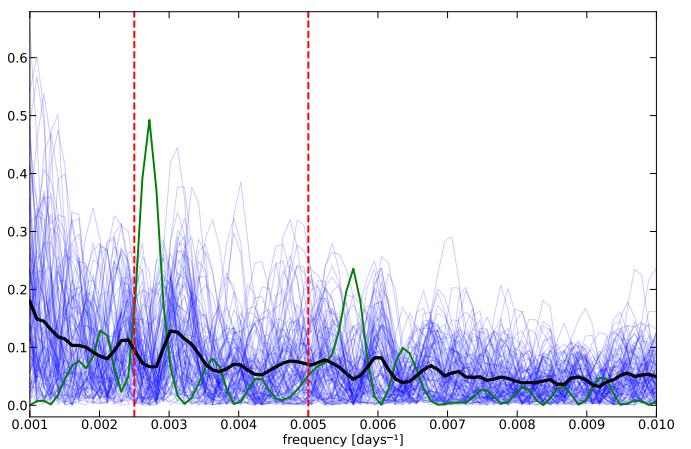


Fig. 5. Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the 100 photo-center displacement of Betelgeuse. Each blue lines correspond to a Lomb-Scargle periodogram of one photo-center displacement. The black line is the average of the 100 periodogram. The red dashed lines represent the 400 and 200 days period respectively (from left to right). As before, the green line is the window function.

Figure 5 shows the Lomb-Scargle periodogram of the photo-center displacement of each one of those 100 series (blue lines) and the average Lomb-Scargle periodogram (black line), while the black dashed lines mark the 400 and 200 days periods respectively. As before, the window function is represented by the green line. Interestingly, we find two bumps around the 400 days period. We cannot directly confirm that we recover the 400 days period from those small bumps, but since polarimetry imaging involves only surface convection, this is an argument that points toward a variability explained by surface convection.

3. The variability of the light curve of Betelgeuse

The presence of the same periods and, after taking into consideration the time span and sparsity of the TBL data series, the larger amplitude of the peaks in polarization data than in the light curve point to a common origin, one that is rather based upon convective dynamics. Since we associate stokes Q and U to proxies of convection, we associate the 200 days period to the typical timescales on which the Stokes parameters evolve. The LSD profiles of stokes Q or U will slightly change when we observe Betelgeuse every month, but are completely overhauled on time scales of several months. The Lomb-Scargle periodograms appear to capture this spectral dynamic around periods of 200 days. Such changes in the profiles are directly linked to the dynamics of the surface, to the evolution and movements of convective cells over the visible hemisphere. So the 200-day period appears to be related to the evolution of the convective patterns on the surface of Betelgeuse. The fact that this peak is strongly present in stokes Q but less in U points toward a more stochastic origin, which can fully be explained by convection.

The other period found in the linear polarization and stokes U , the 330 days periods, is more or less close to the 400 days period often present in the literature (e.g Kiss et al. (2006) found a period 388 ± 30 days). It has been shown by López Ariste et al. (2018) that large convective cells can live up to one year, thus this period would be associated to the timescale on which the largest granules evolve. This typical timescale has also been observed in the numerical simulations and might play an important role in the determination of stellar distances through the displacement of the photo-center (Chiavassa et al. 2022). Once again, the 330 days periodicity being more present in stokes U than Q unravels a stochastic process that is due to convective motions.

Finally, the intensity profile seems to match the 400 days periods, but is uncomfortably close to a peak of the window function of the TBL and a secondary peak close to 200 days. Since we are able to recover the 200 days period in the stokes parameters, we attribute this period to the convective timescales, but concerning the 400 days period, it could be a mix of the typical convective timescales of large granules associated with stochastic pulsations excited by convective cavities. Up to this point, the model developed to interpret linear polarization does not involve pulsations, that is why we interpret the 200 days period as the convective turnover timescale. The 400 days period involve the intensity profile, thus the 400 days period is probably caused by both convective timescales and stochastic pulsations.

3.1. The light curve of Betelgeuse from the point of view of convection

After examining the periods found by the Lomb-Scargle technique on the polarization data, and its derivatives, obtained by the TBL over the last 10 years, it is worth putting them in the

context of the periods found traditionally on light curves over the same period of time. Two aspects are of our interest in this comparison: the behaviour of the light curve before and after the great dimming.

We have recovered the light curve of Betelgeuse in the visible from the AAVSO database for the last 10 years (Figure 6). Before the great dimming, the magnitude of Betelgeuse evolves on a timescale of a year, whereas after the dimming, the variability of Betelgeuse has shortened. It is clear from fig. 6 that the variability of Betelgeuse is evolving on a timescale shorter than one year. This qualitative change has been pointed out before, before the great dimming the main period of Betelgeuse was of 400 days (Kiss et al. 2006). This period is often associated to the fundamental pressure mode. After the dimming however, this period appears to have disappeared and only timescales shorter than 230 days are visible since (Dupree et al. 2022). No explanations have been offered concerning this change of variability after or perhaps because of the dimming, thus we can afford proposing alternative scenarios for the observed periodicities in the light curve.

RSGs encounter mass loss event, where due to stellar winds, plasma is ejected in the interstellar medium. Those events have already been seen in RSG like μ Cep, where López Ariste et al. (2023) found an excess of linear polarization beyond the limb of the star and associated it to rising plumes of plasma in the back hemisphere of the star. In the case of Betelgeuse, this kind of event happened only once or twice during the last 10 years, with no change in the variability of the star. However, since the great dimming, the variability of Betelgeuse has changed, meaning that this event was such different from the usual mass loss event, that it hustled the dynamics of the photosphere.

Considering a scenario where the variability of Betelgeuse is mostly governed by convection, before the great dimming, the variability of the star was linked to the typical timescale on which convection occurs, that is 200 days for the small structures and roughly 350 days for the large structures. The great dimming impacted the behaviour of the photosphere, such that the largest structures do not evolve on timescale of the order of 350 days but rather 200 days, that is the smallest convective structures. We hypothesise that since the dimming, the photosphere is not in equilibrium and the largest convective structures are destroyed by the turbulent motion of the photosphere. Therefore, it is hard to identify periods after the great dimming, which Dupree et al. (2022) noticed. We expect to recover the 400 days variability within the next years, which corresponds to the time for the photosphere to go back to equilibrium.

4. Conclusion

The main observation presented in this work is that the same periods identified in the light curve of Betelgeuse are also seen in the intensity and polarization spectra measured with the TBL. Periods in the light curve have often been traditionally associated to pulsation due to pressure modes. The interpretation of the linear polarization profiles is made in terms of convective structures in the atmosphere of Betelgeuse. We suggest that it is in these convective structures and their temporal evolution that we will find the true reason for the observed periodicities both in the light curve and in the spectropolarimetric observations. This is the main conclusion of this work: since we are able to recover the different periods in the linear polarization profiles, we associate the 200 days periodicity to convective dynamics while the 400 days periodicity is associated to both stochastic pulsations and convective timescales of the largest granules.

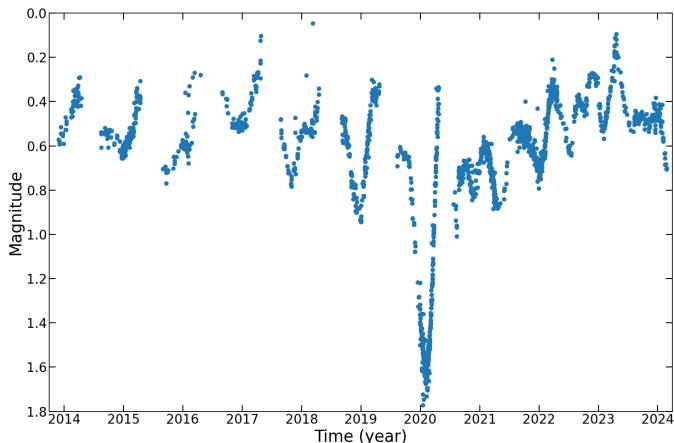


Fig. 6. Light curve of Betelgeuse from AAVSO in the V-band.

Although of secondary importance, we may suggest with more or less ease what phenomena are at the origin of the change of variability before and after the great dimming. We speculate that the great dimming event hustled the dynamics of the photosphere, so that the largest granule are destroyed by the turbulent motions caused by the non equilibrium of the photosphere. Since this event, the variability of Betelgeuse has shortened and is in adequacy with the timescale of which evolve the smallest convective cells, that is 200 days. We expect in the future to see the 400 days variability being the dominant period, the time for the photosphere to go back to equilibrium. Longer time series of spectropolarimetric observations of Betelgeuse will be required to shed light on this

Acknowledgements. This work was supported by the "Programme National de Physique Stellaire" (PNPS) of CNRS/INSU co-funded by CEA and CNES. We acknowledge support from the French National Research Agency (ANR) funded project PEPPE (ANR-20-CE31-0002). We acknowledge the observers of the AAVSO International Database who provided more data than enough to produce this work.

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