

Light pollution in Asiago: a spectroscopic perspective

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Master Thesis in Astrophysics and Cosmology

Abstract

Modern sky brightness monitoring techniques aim to precisely measure the total amount of radiation from the observing site but very little can be said about the various sources responsible for such radiation. In this work I will use spectroscopic data to identify the various sources in the sky of the Asiago Observatory, Italy, and study their temporal evolution.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Part I: Sky sources in theory

- Introduction
 - General introduction
 - Aim of the work
 - About the methodologies
- The natural sky
 - Main natural sources
 - And their footprint on spectra
- The light pollution
 - Definitions and aftermaths
 - Mechanism of working
 - Mention to the models in the literature
 - LP footprint in spectra

Part II: Analysis of sky background in spectra

- Software description
 - Bkg extraction
 - Bkg analysis
- Results
- Discussion and interpretation of the results
- Conclusions

1.1 Light pollution

Light pollution (LP) is the alteration of the natural light level due to artificial sources. The resulting increase of the sky brightness has many proven negative effects.

Effects on the human health. Light exposure in night time decrease the natural production melatonin. The effect is proportional to the frequency of light, with bluer radiation producing a stronger decrease of melatonin production.

Melatonin is an important hormone that regulates many biological mechanisms. It is capable of preventing some forms of cancer and is responsible for the sleep regulation. A melatonin deficiency has been proven to be correlated with higher chances of developing breast and prostate cancers and a decrease of sleep time and quality, which typically lead to further health disorders.

Melatonin decrease is proportional both to light intensity and frequency. A greater effect is given by brighter and bluer sources. In this context the spreading of LED lights, with their strong emissions in the blue side of visible spectrum, is considered a concern by many health associations.

Effects on the environment. LP affects other living beings as well as humans. Animals exposed to abnormal level of light at night change their behaviour and habits. Note this form of pollution is probably the most widespread but yet one of the least acknowledged.

Economical effects. When looking at a artificially bright sky one should consider that such photons that brighten the sky are no longer being used for the purpose they were made for, i.e. lighten streets, houses, commercial areas and so on. The energy, and thus the cost, to produce such photons is wasted.

Unluckily in the last years efficient light sources like LEDs allowed to produce powerful lighting systems at low cost making the economical argument less relevant. Since light is cheaper, it is less critical weather part of it is lost toward the sky.

Cultural effects. All the cultures around the world developed myths and legends involving the heavens; night sky inspired artists and philosophers in western cultures for centuries and in general the observation of a starry sky always belonged to the human experiences. Today due to LP FabbriXX estimates that at least the XX% of the world population lives in areas where milky way is not even visible and only a handful of bright stars can stand out of the polluted sky. In terms of traditions and human experience this is a great loss, but yet difficult, or impossible, to quantify.

Scientific effects. Of course the increase of sky brightness made astronomical observations more difficult. Observation sites moved from the town centres in the XIX century to the rural areas due to the introduction of the first lighting. With the growing urbanization, many of these sites ended up to be at the limb of the expanding urban areas, heavily limiting the possibility of relevant scientific activities. Nowadays it is likely that in a country no totally dark sites are available, forcing astronomers to build new instruments in very remote areas in poorly populated areas of the world.

A typical example of the effects in the changing of the sky condition is the Asiago observatory. It was built in 1942 in a poorly populated highland, which also offered an adequate shielding from the light of the yet small rural centres in the nearby pianura veneta. When built, the observatory also hosted the largest reflecting telescope in the Europe (Gaileo telescope, 122 m of diameter). With the economic boom in the 50s, industrial and manufacturing activities replaced agriculture in the Veneto flatland. Urban areas significantly expanded making Veneto region one of the most light polluted sites in the whole Europe. At the same time the Asiago highland become one of the most appreciated touristic destination in the surrounding area. The quality of the sky rapidly worsened also with respect to other nearby areas less touched by human activities. In such new condition the Asiago Observatory lost its central role in research activities tough preserving its nature of scientific pole.

1.2 Aim of the work

For all the issues above measuring and monitoring the LP is of crucial important.

Chapter 2

The natural sky background

Even when artificial sources are neglected, there still several natural background sources. In this chapter each contribution will be described in detail. In the plot on the Figure 2.1 are reported, in logarithmic scale, the main background sources for a wide range of wavelengths, from UV to radio emission. In the next lines I will consider only sources relevant for optical observations. For clarity I will distinguish between extraterrestrial sources from the terrestrial or atmospheric ones. Major contributions from Sun and Moon light shall be discussed separately.

2.1 Extraterrestrial sources

I will first consider sources of photons outside the earth atmosphere. Using space-based instrument it is possible to study these components without the interference of atmospheric emissions.

2.1.1 Zodiacal light

Zodiacal light consists on sunlight scattered by interplanetary dust particles [Lei75]. From the Earth it looks like a white glow visible during the twilight and extending from the Sun in the zodiacal region.

Angular distribution. The figure 2.3, adapted from [FHLT74], describes the angular distribution of the zodiacal light in ecliptic coordinates. Such light is maximum along the ecliptic and close to the Sun. A fainter local maximum is present in direction opposite to the Sun. It is known as *gegenschein* and is produced by back-scattered solar light. Zodiacal light brightness varies from about 10^{-6} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å on the ecliptic at 30° from the sun to about 10^{-9} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å. Gegenschein maximum brightness reaches about 10^{-7} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å. After the airglow (see §XX), this is the second brightest background source in optical bands.

The contribution of zodiacal light to the optical background is maximum during the twilight, after sunset in spring or before sunrise in autumn, from the northern hemisphere.

Spectral energy distribution. Being essentially reflected sunlight, the optical zodiacal light energy distribution has the same shape of the solar one.

2.1.2 Galactic background

In optical bands a significant contribution to the background level is provided by unresolved stars in the Galaxy. The contribution of such sources depends on the ability of resolve the brightest stars [LBH⁺98], i.e. on the limiting magnitude of the instrument.

Angular distribution. Unresolved stars background follows the morphological structure of the Milky Way. The signal is higher toward the galactic plane and the galactic center. Its spectrum follows typical optical stellar spectra with the characteristic black-body emission. It is the third most relevant contribution to the optic continuum with an emission that spans from peak values of 10^{-6} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å in the most crowded areas to 10^{-8} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å toward the galactic poles.

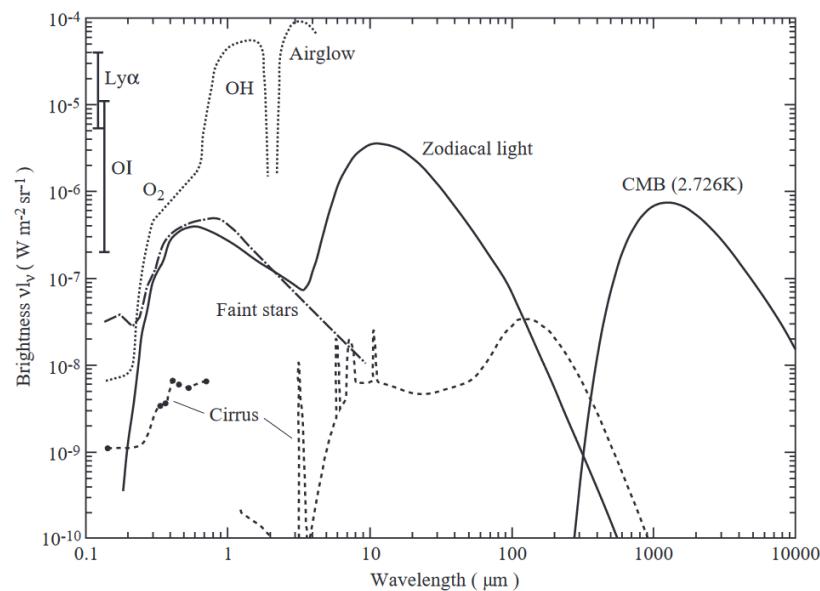


Figure 2.1: Different sky brightness contributions in different electromagnetic domains. In the optical band most relevant contribution are Airglow, zodiacal light and faint stars. From [LBH⁺98].



Figure 2.2: Zodiacal light after sunset at La Silla, Chile. Source: eso.org.

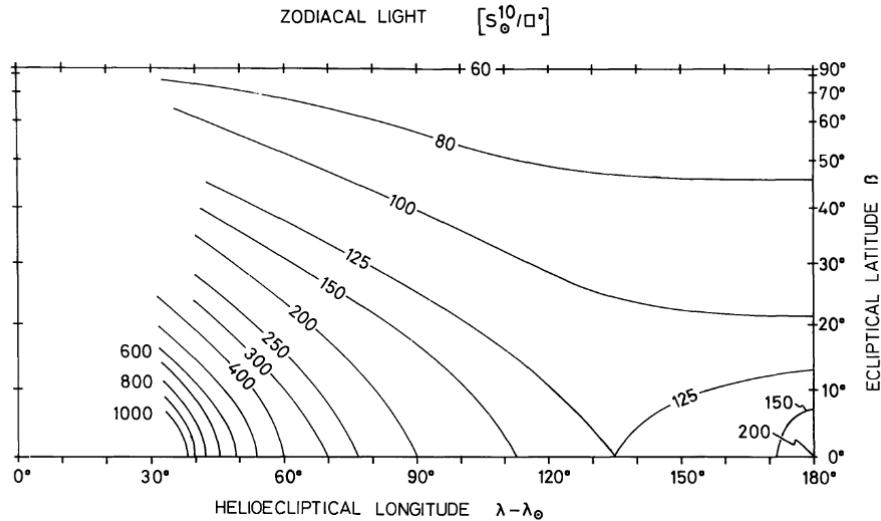


Figure 2.3: Isophotal map of the zodiacal light at 7100 Å. As a reference, according to [LBH⁺98], $1 S_{10}^1 / \Delta^2 = 9.21 \times 10^{-10} \text{ erg/s/cm}^2/\text{sr}/\text{\AA}$ at those wavelengths. From [FHLT74].

2.1.3 Diffuse galactic light

Similar to the zodiacal light, it is the result of the scattering of stellar emission with interstellar dust particles. [LBH⁺98] estimate its contribution as between 20% and 30% of the total integrated light from the galaxy. This estimation is rather uncertain because of the faintness of the radiation and the contamination of direct stellar light. There are no comprehensive maps for the diffuse galactic light but it is very likely this emission to be concentrated along the galactic disk, analogously to the direct stellar component. Its spectral energy distribution is comparable with stellar spectra, since its nature of stellar reflected light.

2.1.4 Extragalactic background

A much smaller contribution is led by the extragalactic background, i.e. emission of faint and/or unresolved galaxies. It is very difficult to quantify the resulting brightness and in many cases are available only the upper limits for extragalactic background. The main estimation difficulties are due to the faintness of the signal and with respect to the other sources. Typical values of intensity are of the order $10^{-9} \text{ erg/s/cm}^2/\text{sr}/\text{\AA}$. No reliable information about spatial distribution is available.

2.2 Terrestrial sources

Terrestrial sources are those capable of producing visible photons in the atmosphere.

2.2.1 Airglow

The airglow is the faint emission on the higher layers of the atmosphere, produced by the interaction between atoms and the particles from the solar wind or by the chemical interaction between atoms. High energy solar particles collide with the atmospheric atoms exciting their electrons to higher energy levels; when the electrons jump back to the initial states they release energy in form of photons, leading to the characteristic emission spectrum. Another possible emission channel is by chemical recombination: when atomic oxygen collides with nitrogen or hydrogen atoms a single molecule (NO or OH) is created and a photon is released. Atomic oxygen or nitrogen are produced by photodissociation of the respective molecules during the day by solar radiation.

Main components. We can subdivide the airglow sources as a function of the height of the emitting layer. A first layer between 85 and 100 km is provided by molecular oxygen, sodium (respectively Herzberg bands and Fraunhofer D line) and OH transitions. Going higher, up to 300 km, forbidden atomic oxygen lines are produced. The outermost layers of the atmosphere, above 1000 km, are usually referred as geocorona; in this region faint but detectable hydrogen lines are produced.



Figure 2.4: Oxygen (green) and sodium (orange) airglow emission, photographed from the ISS. Source: eol.jcs.nasa.gov.

Being produced by thin and homogeneous layers, the airglow emission is relatively uniformly distributed in the sky sphere, with an increase of brightness at high zenithal distances due to the increase of geometric depth along the line of sight. Maximum brightness is achieved at about 10° above the horizon after that the overall brightness is dimmed by atmospheric extinction. Brightest lines can produce a brightness up to 10^{-5} erg/s/cm²/sr/Å

Variations in airglow emission. Airglow emission varies in time, both on short and long timescales, following the behavior of the atmosphere and the solar activity [LBH⁺98]. Emission is also related to the geomagnetic latitude: is maximal in the sub-polar region, at a latitude of about $60^\circ - 80^\circ$ after which it significantly drop. In the polar region airglow emissions are substituted with auroral emission. In the low latitude regions emissions are generally low with a slight increase toward the equator [Eat69].

2.2.2 Aurorae

Aurorae are bright light bands observable at polar latitudes. They are produced by the excitation of atoms in the high layers of the atmosphere by the solar wind. At high latitudes interplanetary high energy charged particles can penetrate the magnetosphere ad reach the atmosphere where they collide and excite atmospheric elements. Excitation energy is then released in form of a photon, responsible for the observed radiation. Auroral spectrum is constituted by emission lines. Colors ranges from green and orange (typical of oxygen transitions) to blue or purple (trace of nitrogen emission), see figure 2.5.

The occurrence and intensity of this phenomenon is strictly regulated by the solar activity, and an increase of auroral emission can be observed during solar storms or period of high activity. The phenomenon is observable only in polar regions, namely above 80° of latitude (see [Eat69]) and for this reason it has a limited impact on the total optical sky background only in that geographic area. Nevertheless in case of intense solar activity like solar storms, aurorae can be observed at lower latitudes. Historical sources even report the sporadic observation of aurorae up to temperate latitudes.

2.2.3 Presence of clouds

The presence of cloud veils typically increases the natural sky level.

2.3 Lunar and solar light



Figure 2.5: Aurora borealis in the northern Finland. Credits: Martincco.

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