

Submesoscale Routes to Lateral Mixing in the Ocean

Amala Mahadevan
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Woods Hole, MA 02543
Phone: (508) 289 3440 fax (508) 457 2181 email: amala@whoi.edu

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Amit Tandon
Physics Department, UMass Dartmouth
285 Old Westport Rd
North Dartmouth MA 02747
Phone: (508) 999-8357 fax: (508) 999-9115 email: atandon@umassd.edu

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LONG-TERM GOALS

To determine whether lateral mixing at O(1-10 km) scales is due to a balanced or unbalanced downscale cascade from the mesoscale, or due to local vertical mixing by internal waves and surface forcing.

OBJECTIVES

Our work is testing hypothesis 3 of the white paper “Scalable Lateral Mixing and Coherent Turbulence”: Non-quasigeostrophic, submesoscale instabilities feed a forward cascade of energy, scalar and Ertel PV variance, which enhances both isopycnal and diapycnal mixing. Related hypotheses are that submesoscale variability is associated with coherent structures and anisotropic mixing. Further, submesoscale processes are inherently vertical, as well as horizontal, and submesoscale processes facilitate cross-front exchange.

APPROACH

Our approach is to run a number of process studies using a three-dimensional non-hydrostatic Process Study Ocean Model (PSOM, *Mahadevan, 2006; Mahadevan and Tandon, 2006*). The typical model resolution for resolving submesoscales is about 1 km in the horizontal. We have examined processes in domains approximately 100 km x 200 km and 100 km x 500 km.

WORK COMPLETED

This work benefited from collaborations with Takeyoshi Nagai (TUMSAT, Japan), Eric Kunze, Eric D’Asaro and Craig Lee (all at U.Washington and participants of the LATMIX DRI), and the

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participation of Ph.D. student Sonaljit Mukherjee (UMassD) and postdoctoral associate, Sanjiv Ramachandran (UMassD).

A modeling study of restratification by mixed layer eddies was undertaken using parameters from the subpolar North Atlantic to understand the role of surface buoyancy fluxes (cooling) in inhibiting restratification. A scaling estimate was derived for the negative buoyancy flux (cooling rate) that prevents restratification by mixed layer eddies, much like the effect of downfront winds described in *Mahadevan, Tandon and Ferrari (2010)*. The relationship was tested against observations from the North Atlantic during the initiation of the spring phytoplankton bloom (*Mahadevan et al., 2012*).

Two approaches were implemented and tested (by S. Ramachandran and S. Mukherjee, UMassD) for inclusion of appropriate subgrid lateral diffusivities in our model runs of submesoscale frontal dynamics: (i) A Smagorinsky closure scheme for anisotropic grids that models the horizontal subgrid diffusion (Fig. 1), and (ii) constant lateral diffusivity of momentum and tracers with varying vertical diffusivity modeled by a $k-\epsilon$ closure scheme (Fig. 2).

A modeling study was undertaken to explain observations of banded ageostrophic shear and enhanced dissipation in the Kuroshio front. The Process Study Ocean Model (PSOM) was initialized with observed cross frontal sections. The model was used to quantify the flux of energy from the geostrophically balanced flow into the internal wave field (Fig. 3) and diagnose the mechanism of internal wave radiation.

Observational data from the 2011 LatMix field experiment is being used to initialize model runs to study the generation of variance in tracer (spice) along isopycnal surfaces.

RESULTS

The application of the surface-forced model runs to the formation of the North Atlantic bloom resulted in a manuscript published in *Science (Mahadevan et al., 2012)*. The study used observations (from an NSF-funded study) and modeling (described here) to show that mixed layer eddies arising from the baroclinic instability of lateral density gradients in the mixed layer can generate stratification prior to the onset of solar warming in the Spring.

A Smagorinsky-type closure for horizontal mixing realizes the theoretically expected rates of energy conversion from potential to kinetic energy. Horizontal diffusivities of magnitude $\sim 5 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ or larger (used on a 1 km x 1 km grid) tend to be overly dissipative (Fig 1).

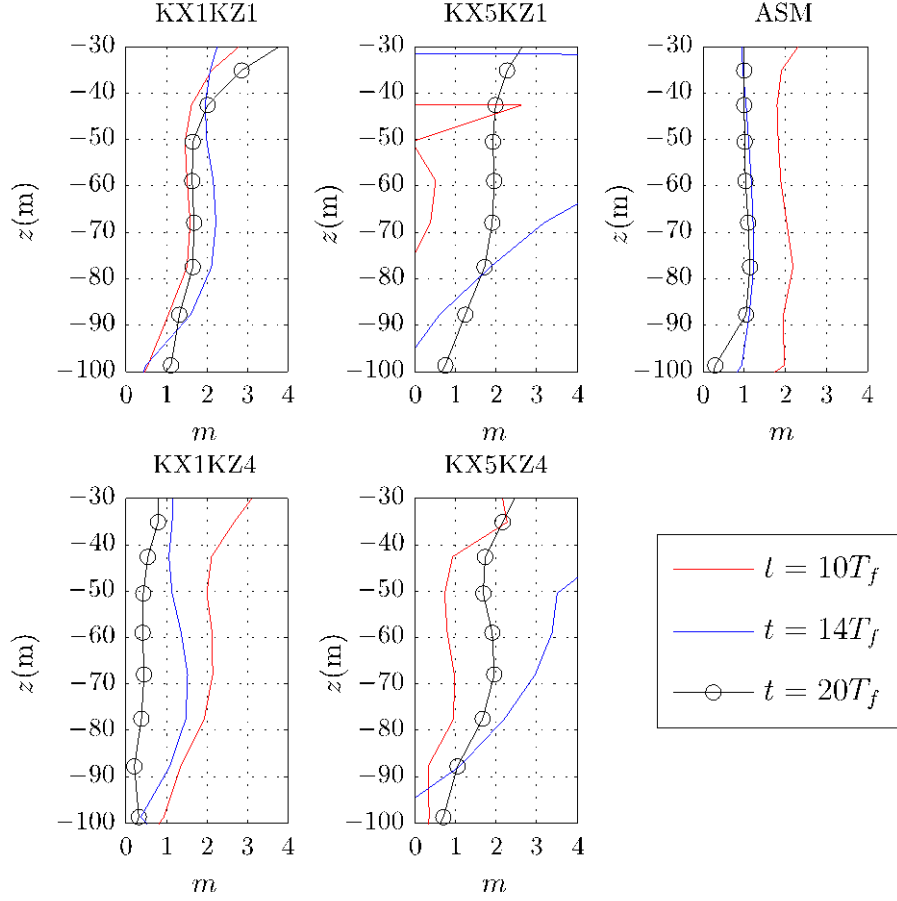


Figure 1: The comparison of APE extraction for the Anisotropic Smagorinsky Scheme (ASM) vs. those with constant coefficients. KX1KZ1 corresponds to horizontal diffusivity of $1\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ and vertical diffusivity of $10^{-5}\text{m}^2/\text{s}$. Vertical profiles of m , the ratio of isopycnal slope to ratio of zonally averaged vertical to horizontal buoyancy gradients is shown at three different times in the simulation. For the most efficient APE extraction, this ratio should be 2 (Eady 1949). For the ASM, the ratio is 2 at early times. As the eddies begin to spin down, the mixing is mostly along isopycnals and the ratio is close to 1. The circles on the black curve indicate the vertical grid levels. The APE extraction is not as efficient with constant coefficients as with ASM.

Lower horizontal diffusivity can be used when coupled with an appropriate vertical mixing scheme using k - ϵ models in GOTM as sub-grid closures for PSOM. An example of enhanced dissipation near fronts with such a closure is shown in Figure 2.

Through meandering and the loss of balance, we find that a strong front transfers energy from the balanced state (geostrophic flow) to near-inertial internal waves (NIW) in the vicinity of the front (Figure 3). In our model simulations, the NIW energy is not transported large distances, but is dissipated near the front. This mechanism could make a significant contribution to the sink of energy from the large-scale flow and is important in that it can occur in the ocean interior.

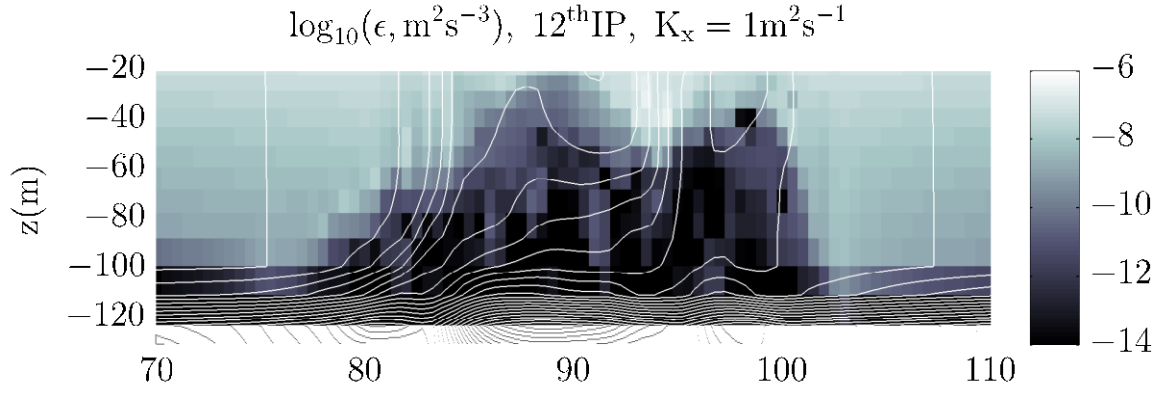


Figure 2: Dissipation as modeled by coupled PSOM- k - ϵ GOTM model for a frontal simulation. The k - ϵ n model is inspired by Venayagamoorthy and Stretch (2010). While enhanced dissipation values are seen near the submesoscale eddy structures, the dissipation decreases to background values in the restratified region.

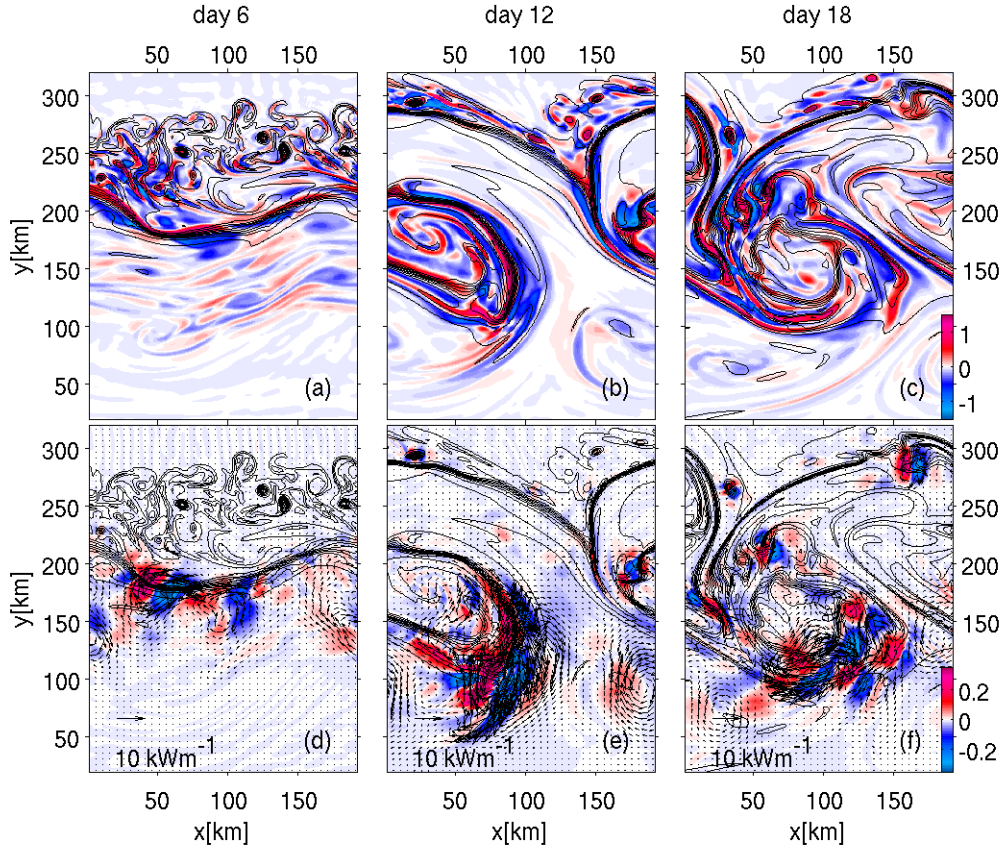


Figure 3: Top Row: Plan views of the relative vorticity (normalized by f) at three different times during the development of a frontal meander. Lower row: Plan views of near-inertial internal wave (NIW) energy divergence. Red indicates a source (transfer of energy from the balanced flow to the NIW field). Blue indicates a loss of energy from NIW to dissipation. Most of the NIW energy is generated and dissipated in the vicinity of the front and is linked to the meander evolution.

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PUBLICATIONS

Current year:

- Nagai, T., A. Tandon, E. Kunze and A. Mahadevan, (Submitted) Spontaneous generation of internal waves by the Kuroshio front.
- Ramachandran, S., A. Tandon and A. Mahadevan 2012, Effect of subgrid-scale mixing on the evolution of submesoscale instabilities, *Ocean Modelling* (Submitted)
- Mahadevan, A., E. D’Asaro, C. Lee and M-J Perry, Eddy-driven stratification initiates North Atlantic spring phytoplankton blooms, 2012, *Science*, 337 (6090), 54-58, DOI:10.1126/science.1218740
- Nagai, T., A. Tandon, H. Yamazaki, M.J. Doubell and S. Gallagher, 2012, Direct observations of microscale turbulence and thermohaline structure in the Kuroshio Front, *J. Geophys. Res.*, 117(C8), C0801

Previous years:

- Badin, G., A. Tandon and A. Mahadevan, Lateral mixing in the pycnocline by baroclinic mixed layer eddies, 2011, *J. Phys. Oceanogr.*, 41, 2080-2101.
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Manuscripts in Preparation

- Idealized mixed-layer simulations using multiple turbulence parameterizations, S. Mukherjee, A. Tandon, S. Ramachandran and A. Mahadevan.