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Volcanic ash aggregation: a new strategy for a theoretical description

Eduardo Rossi¹, Costanza Bonadonna¹

¹University of Geneva

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Particle aggregation is considered as a key process that can strongly affect dispersal and sedimentation of volcanic ash, with significant implications for the associated hazards. It is well known that aggregation has a major role in particle sedimentation affecting the residence time of volcanic ash in the atmosphere. So far, the theoretical description of volcanic ash aggregation is commonly related to the solution of the Smoluchowski Coagulation Equations (SCE), a set of Ordinary Differential Equations (ODEs), which describes the change in time of an initial grain-size distribution due to the interaction of “single” particles. The complete solution of SCE is conditioned by our general knowledge of the physics of interaction between classes of particles (kernels) and our capability to solve a set of equations which is theoretically infinite. One of the possible approaches to the solution of SCE is to reduce the continuous particle distribution to a finite number of classes. This perspective can well relate to the field characterization of tephra deposits, in particular, to the so called Total Grain Size Distribution (TGSD). Nevertheless the common one-dimensional approach seems to not be appropriate for the complexity of volcanic ash aggregates, as it cannot capture all relevant features (e.g. variation of density with particle size). We propose a new approach for the description of particle aggregation based on non-addictive properties for the Population Balance Equations. This algorithm has been applied to observed volcanic eruptions (i.e. Eyjafjallajökull 2010, Sakurajima 2013 and Mt. Saint Helens 1980) to investigate the sensitivity of our model with respect to the input parameters (e.g., TGSD, collision kernels, sticking efficiencies). Constrains on these parameters come from field observations and laboratory experiments.