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Toward a classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

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Abstract

We investigate the various methods currently available for distinguishing between the Central Pacific (CP) El Niño (or "El Niño Modoki") and the canonical El Niño by considering 10 different methods and 5 sea surface temperature (SST) datasets from 1880 to 2010. Years which are classified as CP El Niños with the greatest convergence between method and SST dataset are considered to provide a more robust identification of these events. The results identify 13 yr which are classified the most consistently as CP events: 1885/1886, 1914/1915, 1940/1941, 1958/1959, 1963/1964, 1968/1969, 1977/1978, 1986/1987, 1991/1992, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2009/2010. Our findings also indicate the persistence of CP events throughout the time period investigated, inciting the role of multidecadal natural climate variability in generating CP El Niños.

1 Introduction

El Niño is the oceanic component of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a phenomenon of large-scale variability in the coupled ocean-atmosphere system, originating over the tropical Pacific (Walker, 1923, 1924). ENSO comprises the strongest climatic signal on interannual time scales and produces significant implications on the world's climate (Alexander et al., 2002). While the canonical El Niño involves the westward propagation of positive sea surface temperature anomalies (SSTAs) off the South American coast in the Eastern Pacific (Rasmusson and Carpenter, 1982), in recent decades a "new" type has been observed characterized by SSTAs confined to the central Pacific (Kao and Yu, 2009). It appears in the literature under a number of labels including "El Niño Modoki" (Ashok et al., 2007), "Central Pacific" (Kao and Yu, 2009), "Warm Pool" (Kug et al., 2009), "Date Line El Niño" (Larkin and Harrison, 2005) as well as "S-Mode" (Guilyardi, 2006). Studies have also demonstrated that this "new" type (hereafter CP El Niño) may produce climatic teleconnections differing from the

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

canonical El Niño (hereafter EP El Niño) thereby motivating research on the topic (Larkin and Harrison, 2005; Ashok et al., 2007; Feng et al., 2010; Graf and Zanchettin, 2012).

The discovery of the CP El Niño has encouraged considerable scientific research to distinguish it from the canonical event. The National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center (CPC) traditionally defined El Niños using the Niño-3.4 SST index, and the criterion that the 3-month running mean of the SST index exceeds 0.5 °C (Trenberth, 1997). The different characteristics of the CP El Niño could not be adequately described by the Niño-3.4 index, leading to the construction of the "Trans-Niño Index" to encompass this variability (Trenberth and Stepaniak, 2001). Further work culminated in a plethora of indices, methods, datasets and time periods used to identify CP El Niños (Ashok et al., 2007; Hendon et al., 2009; Kao and Yu, 2009; Kim et al., 2009; Kug et al., 2009; Yeh et al., 2009; Yu and Kim, 2010; Ren and Jin, 2011). The result is a fairly varied delineation of the CP El Niño years, characteristics, climatological impacts and mechanisms.

The prevalence and future evolution of the CP El Niño (particularly in light of climate change) is also currently under debate in the literature. Satellite evidence suggests that the frequency of CP events has increased in recent decades (Lee and McPhaden, 2010). A climate modeling exploration also indicated the potential increase in frequency of CP El Niños with anthropogenic climate change (Yeh et al., 2009). Other studies contest these claims and suggest that the apparent emergence of CP El Niños can be explained by natural climate variability (Newman et al., 2011; McPhaden et al., 2011; Yeh et al., 2011). A multi-model ensemble also demonstrated the variable representation of CP and EP El Niños in climate simulations (Guilyardi, 2006). This discrepancy in the representation of the two events was also shown in the CMIP5 models (Kim and Yu, 2012), demanding an improved understanding of the phenomenon.

The present study is aimed at clarifying the classification of CP El Niño years in the literature through considering multiple methods and SST datasets from 1880 to the present. Motivation stems from the currently large span of techniques existing in the

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

literature which have resulted in varied interpretations of the CP El Niño. Key questions addressed will include: How does the classification of the CP event differ when different techniques and datasets are used? Which years contain the greatest probability of a CP event having occurred? Has the occurrence of CP events changed in the time period investigated? It is hoped that providing a more robust identification of CP events over a longer time period will assist other studies in improving our understanding of the CP phenomenon.

2 Data and methodology

Ten methods for classifying the CP El Niño using different indices, data sets and time periods are examined in the literature (summarized in Table 1). In addition, the present study also proposes a method for classifying events based on the timing of the SSTAs' evolution in different regions of the Pacific. This provides a different perspective on classifying the events compared to other methods which are largely concerned with the magnitude of SSTA. In this method a CP event is said to occur if SSTAs exceeding the 0.5 °C criterion, occur in the Niño-4 region before reached in the Niño-1+2 region for the period of development (April–December).

The indices used by Takahashi et al. (2011) to classify CP and EP events describe the SSTA empirical orthogonal function (EOF) patterns in the Pacific and are noted for their ability to interpret the different El Niño patterns in a dynamical sense. Timeseries of the 10-yr running mean of these two indices are computed to investigate whether dynamical changes in ENSO behavior can also be observed in long term variability. These indices are compared with the El Niño Modoki (EMI) index (Ashok et al., 2007) to examine the co-variability.

To investigate the comparability between the techniques, the classification criteria are applied to five different monthly SST datasets. These include the NOAA Extended Reconstructed SST V2 (ERSST V2) ($2^\circ \times 2^\circ$ global grid) (Smith and Reynolds, 2004) and V3 (ERSST V3) ($2^\circ \times 2^\circ$ global grid) (Smith et al., 2008), the HadISST ($1^\circ \times 1^\circ$

ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

global grid) (Rayner et al., 2003), the ICOADS 2° (2° × 2° global grid) (Worley et al., 2005) and the Kaplan Extended SST V2 (5° × 5° global grid) (Kaplan et al., 1998). Data are pre-processed to give deseasoned monthly SSTAs. Timeseries of the indices used by the different authors are created for each dataset.

The classifications are performed for each of the five datasets and ten methods, and the number of CP El Niños classified for each year is recorded. Classified years represent the CP events with mature phases in December and extending into the following year. Indices are here evaluated based on all available data, without filling missing values. Of course, this is a caveat for our interpretation of the results. Limitations due to the incomplete nature of the data are particularly evident in the ICOADS dataset, which suffers from missing values especially in the early decades which appear in the different indices used in the classifications. Other problems might arise from the use of EOF patterns to fill in gaps in observed SST.

The results of the classification are then used to create a list of years which can be classified as CP events with greater confidence. This is achieved by first identifying those years which are classified as CP events the most consistently among the different methods and datasets. The SSTA evolution of these individual years is then inspected visually by using the HadISST dataset (selected here as a reference for its full-coverage and reliability, and for its wide usage by the referenced authors, see Table 1). This latter step is to ensure that the indices have correctly identified CP events.

3 Results

Figure 1 summarizes the long-term evolution of the tropical Pacific SSTA indices for each considered dataset (ICOADS excluded), in the form of standardized 10-yr running mean data. It illustrates the differences which exist between the indices and datasets used to classify the CP events. Differences among datasets are clearly visible early in the time period. An example is the pronounced negative value of the indices between 1895 and 1900 which appears in the HadISST and Kaplan SST, but not the

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

ERSST datasets. The "C" index (see Table 1) is strongly correlated with the Niño-4 index (> 0.99 in the HadISST dataset) and is therefore not included in the figure. Correlations between the different indices are also investigated in the HadISST data for 30-yr running means. The results indicate no correlation between "C" and EMI, 0.93 between "C" and WP and 0.10 between EMI and WP (note, this is only partly due to the different trends in the "C", WP and EMI series).

The 10-yr running mean also helps to provide an indication of the low frequency variability of Pacific SSTAs over the period, demonstrating periods of higher CP occurrence. Generally we find strong co-variability in all Niño indices at higher CP frequency, indicating basin-wide strong events appearing in the 10-yr running means. These are coherent throughout all data sets. Stronger co-variability can be found for Niño-3 and Niño-4 indices, which, however also exhibit differences indicated by periods of Niño-4 > Niño-3 and vice versa. In the HadISST dataset, the 10-yr running mean Niño-3 and Niño-4 indices are correlated at 0.79 (significant at $p = 0.05$).

Two features are most striking in all data sets: (1) the strong decadal variability between 1890 and 1920 with a swing between strong negative (1895–1902) to positive (1904–1910), and afterwards again negative indices. (2) Since around 1980, all Niño indices increase coherently, indicating a warming trend of the Pacific basin with the increase being strongest for Niño-4. It is also interesting to note the lack of skill in the EMI index to represent the recent CP events of 1990 to present in all datasets.

Takahashi et al. (2011) propose indices they developed from EOF analysis and rotating PC1 and PC2, which can be approximated by the definitions of "E" and "C" indices (Table 1). Their "E" index explains most of the variability in the eastern Pacific east of 120° W and along the coast of Peru. The "C" index has its strongest explained variance in the central Pacific (170° E to 100° W) and is therefore very close to the standard Niño-4 index. Figure 2 shows 10-yr running means of the standardized "E" and "C" indices which demonstrate a period of preferred EP occurrence early in the time series, from approximately 1890 to 1910 in all datasets excluding ERSST V2. This is then replaced by a period of preferred CP occurrence around 1910. Other periods of preferred CP

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

occurrence distinct from EP occurrence occur around 1970, and again in the 1990s. These features are visible in all datasets and match our findings for the standard Niño indices discussed above. Again, however, we find differences in the amplitudes between the datasets.

Figure 2 also shows the 10-yr running mean of the EMI index of Ashok et al. (2007), which is equivalent to the PC2 of tropical Pacific SST variability. The EMI index demonstrates strong co-variability with the "C" index in the HadISST and Kaplan datasets. As remarked above, despite the strong co-variability with the "C" index, the EMI index fails to reproduce the most recent CP occurrences from 1990 to present. Another feature of the EMI index which is illustrated in Fig. 2, is its ability to define periods in which "C" > "E" and vice versa (for example, the period of negative "C" around 1900, and positive "C" around 1970). It is noted that the most recent period of high CP frequency from around 1995 to present, is accompanied by a similarly high value in the "E" index.

Figure 3a illustrates the variability which exists between the methods used for classifying CP El Niños according to the dataset. Differences are to be expected given the range of indices and criteria employed by the different authors. A key feature is the detection of CP El Niños already in the 19th century and early in the 20th century, contrasting with studies which identify CP events as a "new" phenomenon which has emerged in recent decades (Ashok et al., 2007). The CP events persist throughout the time series, despite variations and an increased event concentration in more recent decades.

Figure 3b illustrates the variability existing between the datasets used to classify CP El Niños according to the method. The results in Fig. 3b also display the incidence of CP events early in the dataset, although agreement in their classification appears to increase in the later part of the 20th century. The concentration of CP events is observed to increase later in the time period. In particular, Kug et al. (2009), Ren and Jin (2011), and Yeh et al. (2009) classify fewer CP events in the early portion of the data compared to the other methods. These three methods base their classification on the use of the Niño-3 and Niño-4 indices. The classification of the present study, which uses the

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

Niño-1+2 and Niño-4 indices, classifies fewer events throughout the entire time period. Figure 3 thus demonstrates the overall intermittent and uninterrupted representation of CP El Niños throughout 1880 to 2010 in both datasets and methods.

Figure 3c summarizes the likelihood of a CP El Niño occurrence through time. It assists with illustrating the years in which the greatest convergence in methods and datasets occurs for classifying CP El Niños. For example the following 16 El Niños stand out: 1885/1886, 1914/1915, 1940/1941, 1958/1959, 1963/1964, 1968/1969, 1977/1978, 1986/1987, 1990/1991, 1991/1992, 1992/1993, 1994/1995, 2001/2002, 2002/2003, 2003/2004 and 2004/2005. The convergence in methods and datasets allows these years to be classified as CP events with somewhat greater certainty. Figure 3c also exhibits the increased probability of CP El Niños later in the dataset which supports the improved consistency inferred from Fig. 3a and b. We still see, however, divergence between different methods and datasets. It is therefore necessary to assess the classification by looking at the evolution of these individual events (Fig. 4), as they might be misinterpreted by using indices only.

In Fig. 4 the temporal evolution of SSTA is shown as derived from HADISST data set for JJA, SON, and DJF. The first impression concerns the general warming tendency from the late 19th century to the early 21st across the Pacific basin, which is strongest in the latest decades. Three of the initially diagnosed CP El Niño events coincide with the volcanic eruptions of Agung (1963/1964) and Pinatubo (1991/1992 and 1992/1993). To analyze the climatic consequences of these events, one has to take into account that the stratospheric volcanic aerosol layer might have modulated or even overridden the SST effects (Graf and Zanchettin, 2012).

Looking at the mature phase (DJF) we can conclude that three events are misclassified as CP events. Most prominently this holds for 2001/2002, which clearly is a La Niña situation evolving in a generally warmer Pacific background situation, where positive SSTAs are found only west of the dateline, but strong negative SSTAs dominate in the east. Especially the EMI index, in which negative east Pacific SSTAs strongly contribute to a positive index value, leads to misclassification. The 1990/1991 event is also

ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

characterized by La Niña conditions in the East pacific and positive SSTA are restricted to the western part of the basin. In 1992/1993, after positive SSTA covering most of the central and eastern tropical Pacific in JJA, a negative anomaly develops along the equator from South America towards the date line in SON and DJF. In 1994/1995, La Niña conditions prevail in JJA and weaken in SON before clear El Niño conditions mature in DJF.

Reducing the list of CP events that are obviously misclassified we find 13 events which may be termed CP El Niño: 1885/1886, 1914/1915, 1940/1941, 1958/1959, 1963/1964, 1968/1969, 1977/1978, 1986/1987, 1991/1992, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2009/2010 (the latter not included in the above analysis). All these events (except 1914/1915 and 1977/1978) share the common feature of involving strong positive SSTA off the coast of California and Mexico extending into the Central Pacific in boreal summer (JJA). In the following seasons (SON and DJF) the positive SSTA strengthen and expand near or just east of the dateline and slightly negative SSTA appear off the coast of South America.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Applying ten different methods taken from the literature to seven SST reconstruction/reanalysis datasets, the present study has attempted to constrain the classification of CP El Niño years from 1880 to present. From the results, the following 13 CP events appear with greatest convergence in both the datasets and methods considered: 1885/1886, 1914/1915, 1940/1941, 1958/1959, 1963/1964, 1968/1969, 1977/1978, 1986/1987, 1991/1992, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2009/2010. These years are further constrained by a visual investigation of the SSTA associated with each individual event (Fig. 4a and b). Care should be taken when considering the climate anomalies associated with the 1963/1964 and 1991/1992 CP events which co-occur with volcanic eruptions. This consideration provides a more robust classification of CP El Niños than is permitted by using any one method/dataset on its own. These

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

results also show that CP events indeed occur early in the data, contradicting studies claiming it to be a phenomenon exclusive of recent decades (Ashok et al., 2007). The 13 events classified for the most part demonstrate a pattern of SSTA which first develops off the coast of South America and Mexico in boreal summer (JJA) which then extends westward toward the Central Pacific.

The occurrence of CP events is also found to persist (though, of course, appearing intermittently) throughout the period 1880–2010. In particular this is evident when the methods of Ashok et al. (2007), Hendon et al. (2009), Kao and Yu (2009) and Yu and Kim (2010) are used. The consistency of the CP classifications improves later in the time period, which certainly signals the improvement in the quality and therefore convergence between the SST datasets later in the 20th century. The occurrence and persistence of CP events from early in the datasets also provides support for studies which identify the CP event as comprising a form of natural climate variability (Newman et al., 2011; McPhaden et al., 2011; Yeh et al., 2011). We note that the period showing prominent CP event clusters after 2000, appears to be characterized by decadal general warming of the tropical Pacific (as illustrated by the smoothed SST indices in Fig. 1). Periods of CP clusters shown in the SST indices (1900–1910 and 1990–2010) also coincide with positive values of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO). These patterns are demonstrated further by consideration of the "C" index (Takahashi et al., 2011) and EMI index (Ashok et al., 2007). The association of ENSO with the PDO has been noted in other studies (e.g. Zhang et al., 1996; Zanchettin et al., 2008). Low-frequency climate variability may therefore be one possible important player in the accumulation of CP events during certain periods.

In conclusion, this study helps to constrain the classification of CP El Niños from the varied approaches which exist in the current literature. There is no one classification which could be singled out as the "best". A more robust classification of CP events is necessary to enhance our understanding of their past, present and future variability. This should include information about the physical processes leading to CP events, which differs from canonical EP events (see, e.g., Guilyardi, 2006). Our findings have

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

shown that CP events have indeed occurred also in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and have appeared intermittently throughout the last ~ 130 yr, although with increased frequency during recent decades. Variability in the spatial evolution of the SSTA associated with the CP events was also illustrated. Future studies focusing on ENSO physics are therefore necessary to augment our knowledge on the currently observed changes in El Niño characteristics and their potential global implications.

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ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

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ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

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ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

Title Page
Abstract | Introduction
Conclusions | References
Tables | Figures
Back | Close
Full Screen / Esc
Printer-friendly Version
Interactive Discussion

Table 1. Dataset, time period, indices and criteria used to classify the CP El Niño. The acronym DJF stands for the season December-January-February, etc... "σ" is the standard deviation. The EMI index is created through other Niño indices and defined as: $\mathrm{EMI} = \mathrm{SSTA_a} - 0.5 \cdot \mathrm{SSTA_b} - 0.5 \cdot \mathrm{SSTA_c}$ ($\mathrm{SSTA_a}$ = 165 E – 140 W; 10 S – 10 N, $\mathrm{SSTA_b}$ = 110 W – 70 W; 15 S – 5 N, $\mathrm{SSTA_c}$ = 125 E – 145 E; 10 S – 20 N). The "C" Index is defined as: $C = 1.7 \cdot$ Niño-4 – 0.1 cot Niño-1+2. The "E" Index is defined as: E = Niño-1+2 – 0.5 $\cdot$ Niño-4. The Warm Pool index is defined as $\mathrm{WP} = \mathrm{N3} - \alpha \mathrm{N4}$ where N3 = Niño-3, N4 = Niño-4, $\alpha = 2/5$ when $\mathrm{N3} \cdot \mathrm{N4} > 0$ and otherwise $\alpha = 0$. The other indices are defined as follows: Niño-4 = 160 E – 150 W; 5 S – 5 N, Niño-3 = 90 W – 150 W; 5 S – 5, Niño-1+2 = 90 W – 80 W; 0 – 10 S (Trenberth, 1997). PC1 is the principal component of the leading Empirical Orthogonal Function calculated from monthly SSTAs in the equatorial Pacific domain bounded by 10° N–10° S and 120 E – 90 W.

Author	Dataset	Time period	SST indices used	Criteria for defining CP event
Ashok et al. (2007)	HadISST	1958–2005	EMI	EMI > 0.7 seasonal σ (DJF)
Handon et al. (2009)	HadISST	1980–2006	EMI	EMI (3-month running mean) > 0.7 seasonal standard deviation (SON)
Kao and Yu (2009)	HadISST	1950–2007	PC1 of SSTAs with substracted anomalies regressed with Niño-1+2	SST PC > 1σ for more than 3 consecutive months
Kim et al. (2009)	ERSST V2	1950-2006	Niño-3 Niño-4	Niño-4 > 1σ Niño-3 < 1σ (ASO)
Kug et al. (2009)	ERSST V2	1970–2005	Niño-3 Niño-4	Niño-4 > Niño-3 and Niño-4 > σ (SONDJF)
Present study	Kaplan	1880–2010	Niño-4 Niño-1+2	Niño-4 0.5 °C before Niño-1+2 (April–February)
Ren and Jin (2011)	CPC NOAA Timeseries	1950–2010	"Niño-Warm Pool" (WP)	WP > 1σ
Takahashi et al. (2011)	HadISST	1950–2009	"C" Index	"C" Index 5-month running mean > 0.5 °C
Yeh et al. (2009)	ERSST V2	1979–2007	Niño-3 Niño-4	Niño-4 > Niño-3 (DJF)
Yu and Kim (2010)	ERSST V3 and HadISST	1958–2007	PC1 of SSTAs with substracted anomalies regressed with Niño-1+2	SST PC1 > 1σ (SONDJF)

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

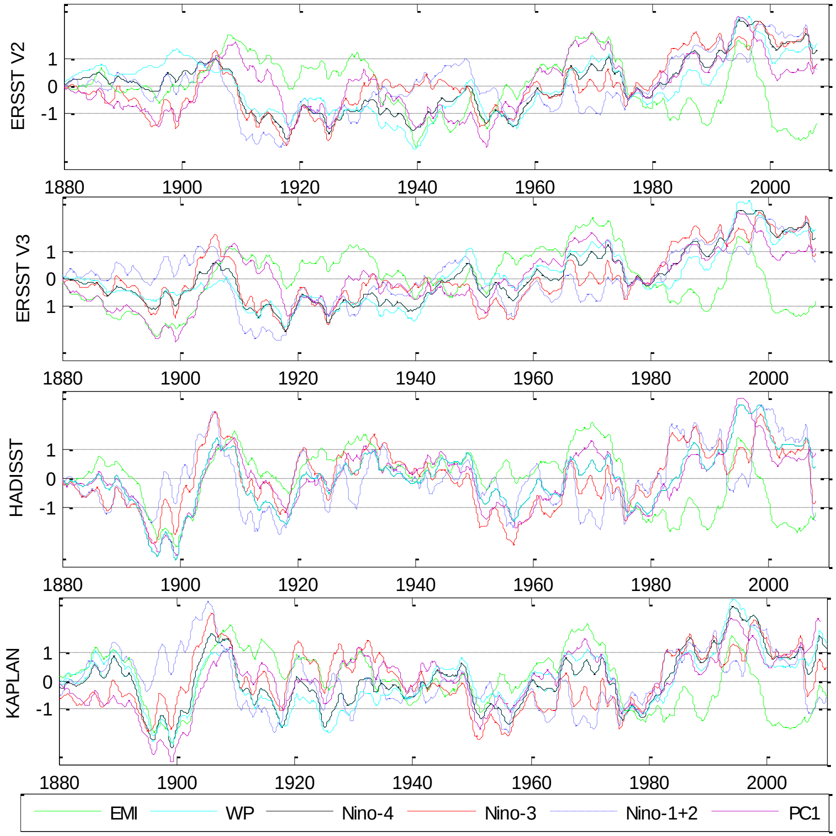

Fig. 1. Temporal evolution of the SSTA indices used to classify CP events for ERSST V2 **(a)**, ERSST V3 **(b)**, HadISST **(c)** and Kaplan **(d)**. The ICOADS data is excluded due to the missing data earlier in the century. Plotted data are standardized, 10-yr running mean averaged indices. Dotted lines indicate the ± 1 standard deviation band.

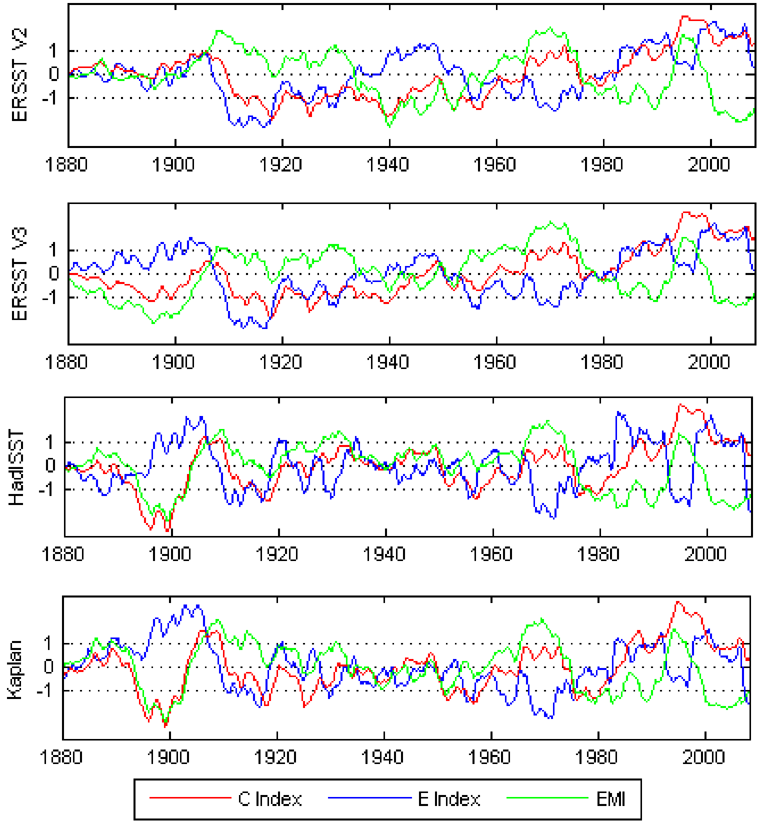

Fig. 2. Temporal evolution of the “C” and “E” indices (Takahashi et al., 2011) used to classify CP and EP events (respectively), and the EMI index (Ashok et al., 2007) used to classify CP for ERSST V2 **(a)**, ERSST V3 **(b)**, HadISST **(c)** and Kaplan **(d)**. The ICOADS data is excluded due to the missing data earlier in the century. Plotted data are standardized, 10-yr running mean averaged indices. Dotted lines indicate the ± 1 standard deviation band.

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

Title Page
Abstract | Introduction
Conclusions | References
Tables | Figures
◀| |▶
◀ ▶
Back | Close
Full Screen / Esc
Printer-friendly Version
Interactive Discussion

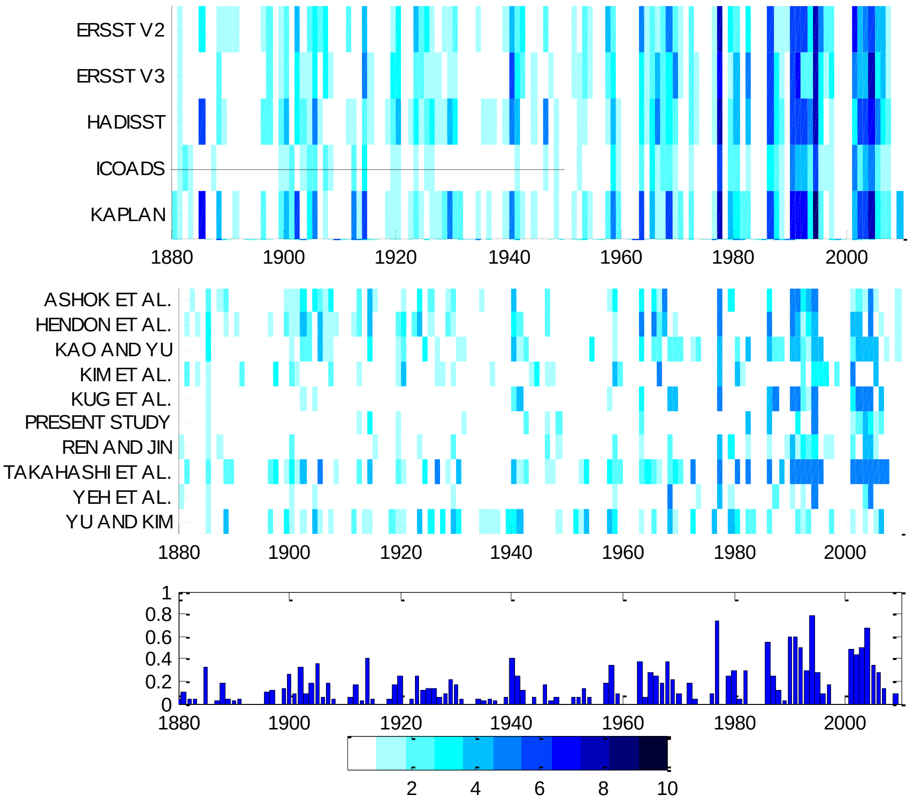

Fig. 3. Number of times a CP El Niño event is classified for each year during the period 1880–present according to the methods **(a)** and datasets **(b)** investigated. Probability that a given year is a CP El Niño year **(c)**. The probability (shown on y-axis) is calculated by taking the sum of CP events classified for each year in **(a)** methods and **(b)** authors, divided by 15 (i.e. the total possible number of CP events which can occur based on the 5 methods and 10 authors). The time period which contains missing values in the ICOADS dataset is shown by the dashed line **(a)**.

ESDD
3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

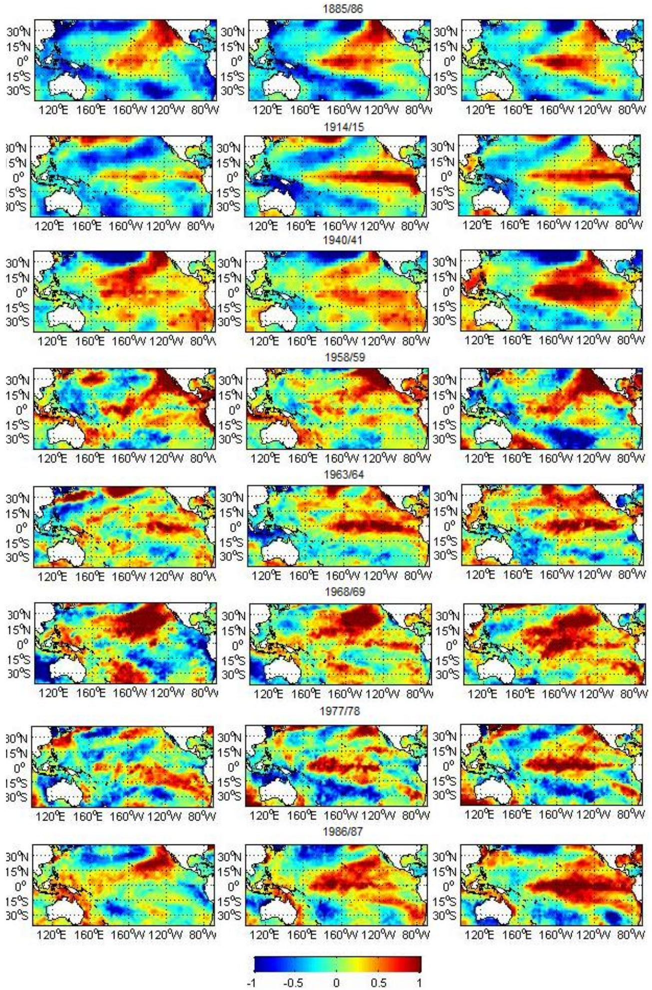

Fig. 4. Caption on next page.

ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.

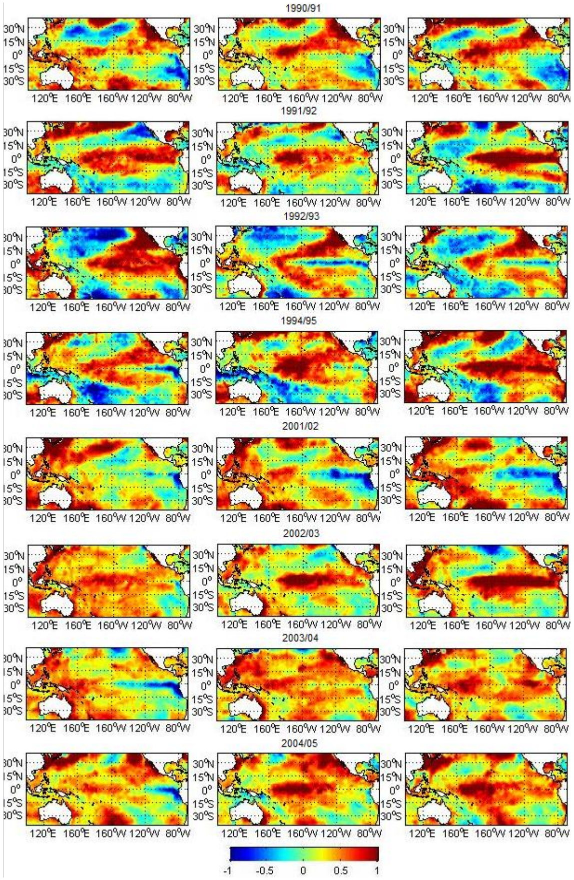

Fig. 4. HadISST SSTA (°C) composite maps for the CP El Niño events identified in Fig. 3. Maps are shown for the seasons JJA (left panel), SON (middle panel) and DJF (right panel, mature El Niño phase).

ESDD

3, 979–998, 2012

Classification of the Central Pacific El Niño

M. Pascolini-Campbell et al.