Global-scale Evaluation of SMAP, SMOS and ASCAT Soil Moisture Products using Triple Collocation

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Abstract

Global-scale surface soil moisture products are currently available from multiple remote sensing platforms. Footprint-scale assessments of these products are generally restricted to limited number of densely-instrumented validation sites. However, by taking active and passive soil moisture products together with a third independent soil moisture estimates via land surface modeling, triple collocation (TC) can be applied to estimate the correlation metric of satellite soil moisture products (versus an unknown ground truth) over a quasi-global domain. Here, an assessment of Soil Moisture Active Passive (SMAP), Soil Moisture Ocean Salinity (SMOS) and Advanced SCATterometer (ASCAT) surface soil moisture retrievals via TC is presented. Considering the potential violation of TC error assumptions, the impact of active-passive and satellite-model error cross correlations on the TC-derived inter-comparison results is examined at *in situ* sites using quadruple collocation analysis. In addition, confidence intervals for the TC-estimated correlation metric are constructed from moving-block bootstrap sampling designed to preserve the temporal persistence of the original (unevenly-sampled) soil moisture time-series. This study is the first to apply TC to obtain a robust global-scale cross-

assessment of SMAP, SMOS and ASCAT soil moisture retrieval accuracy in terms of anomaly temporal correlation. Our results confirm the overall advantage of SMAP (with a global average anomaly correlation of 0.76) over SMOS (0.66) and ASCAT (0.63) that has been established in several recent regional, ground-based studies. SMAP is also the best-performing product over the majority of applicable land pixels (52%), although SMOS and ASCAT each shows advantage in distinct geographic regions.

1. Introduction

As a key state variable in hydrological and meteorological modeling systems, the global observation of soil moisture has become a major priority. Currently, several remote sensing platforms provide continuous global surface (approximately 0-5 cm) retrievals: the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)¶ Soil Moisture Active Passive (SMAP, 2015-), the European Space Agency (ESA)¶ Soil Moisture Ocean Salinity (SMOS, 2009-), the European Organisation for the Exploitation of Meteorological Satellites (EUMETSAT)¶ Advanced SCATterometers (ASCAT, 2007-), and the Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA)¶ Advanced Microwave Scanning Radiometer 2 (AMSR2, 2012-). The accuracy of the satellite soil moisture retrievals is typically described via their root-mean-squared-error (RMSE; e.g. Brocca *et al*. 2010; Jackson *et al*. 2010; Kerr *et al*. 2016) or de-biased/unbiased RMSE (ubRMSE; e.g. Colliander *et al*. 2017) versus ground-based observations at a footprint-scale. However, difficulty in obtaining viable estimates of ground truth soil moisture at the satellite footprint scale has limited past validation activities to a small number of locations (e.g., 60$¶ core validation sites) and/or discrete time periods (e.g., field campaigns). The broader evaluation of satellite soil moisture products (across regional or continental scales) is typically based on comparisons with sparse ground soil moisture networks or modeled datasets (e.g., Paulik *et al*. 2014; González-Zamora *et al*. 2015; Piles *at al.* 2014; Al-Yaari *et al*. 2014; Polcher *et al*. 2016;

Kim *et al*. 2018). Naturally, such comparisons are unable to provide direct validation metrics relative to the ground truth, but rather metrics against a chosen reference dataset with unknown errors at the footprint-scale of satellite retrievals. For example, correlation coefficient metrics obtained from comparing with point-scale ground observations have been shown to underestimate the correlation between retrievals and true soil moisture values (Chen *et al*. 2017).

Initially designed for obtaining the calibration constants against a reference dataset in satellite wind speed products, the triple collocation (TC) (Stoffelen 1998) technique provides a solution to such challenge. In particular, TC can be applied to the estimate error variances of a geophysical measurement system and has become an important tool for satellite soil moisture assessments (e.g., Zwieback *et al*. 2012; Dorigo *et al*. 2010; Miralles *et al*. 2010; Draper *et al*. 2013). However, standard TC applications are limited to only providing relative error metrics. It requires a reference dataset to be chosen from the three collocated data products, and the resulting error variances are subject to the multiplicative and additive biases of the reference dataset (Chen *et al*. 2017). Recently developed TC-based solution ± the Extended Triple Collocation, or ETC (McColl 2014) ± IRUWKH3HDUVRQ¶VFRUUHODWLRQFRHIILFLHQWPHWULFRQ other hand, does not require a reference dataset and yields an absolute estimate of the temporal correlatioQEHWZHHQWKHSURGXFWXQGHUHYDOXDWLRQDQGWKHXQNQRZQWUXWK3HDUVF coefficient is a widely reported metric for satellite soil moisture and an appropriate metric for summarizing retrieval value in a data assimilation context (Reichle *et al.*, 2008). In this analysis, we adopt the ETC solution and conduct an assessment and inter-comparison of the SMAP Level 3, SMOS Level 3 and ASCAT Level 2 soil moisture products based on the correlation metric (*R*). Until recently, relatively few studies have been conducted to evaluate satellite soil moisture products at a continental scale (e.g. Draper *et al*. 2013; Leroux *et al*. 2013) using TC. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to apply TC to obtain the footprint-scale correlation metric for SMAP observations at quasi-global scale, and compare it directly with soil moisture retrievals from SMOS and ASCAT.

Our basic strategy for applying TC is to employ soil moisture data triplets comprising a passive microwave product (SMAP or SMOS), an active remote sensing product (ASCAT), and a land surface model product. TC is based on a fundamental assumption that each of these products contain uncorrelated errors. However, recent works have identified non-negligible error correlation in soil moisture products acquired from active and passive microwave sources (Gruber *et al*. 2016b; Pierdicca *et al*. 2017). This suggests that it is necessary to examine the impact of violating this assumption on SMAP-ASCAT and SMOS-ASCAT-based TC analyses. Therefore, we also apply the least-squares quadruple collocation solution (QC, Pierdicca *et al*. 2015) to estimate the error cross-correlations at over 200 sparse ground observation sites to further evaluate the robustness of our global TC analysis strategy.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the TC and quadruple collocation (QC) methodologies and data-processing procedures as well as the use of moving-block bootstrap re-sampling to obtain confidence intervals for TC-derived *R*. Section 3 describes the remote sensing, land surface modeling and ground observation datasets used in the analysis. Section 4 presents the QC results at sparse network sites and discusses the sensitivity of the TC analysis to both non-zero error cross-correlation between active and passive satellite soil moisture products and our choice of a particular land surface model dataset. Results and discussions of global comparison of SMAP, SMOS and ASCAT soil moisture via TC are presented in Sections 5 and 6, respectively.

2. Methodologies

2.1 **Extended Triple Collocation**

In soil moisture validation and comparison studies, TC has typically been applied to estimate the random error variance of a particular soil moisture dataset. In contrast, the extended triple collocation (ETC) approach (McColl 2014) solves for the correlation between a dataset and the unknown truth. As in TC, it requires three collocated, independent measurement systems (*X*, *Y*, *Z*, in our case representing: a passive satellite retrieval, an active satellite retrieval and a model product, respectively) that describe the same geophysical variable (in this case - average surface soil moisture of the satellite grid cell, which is approximately 40 x 40 km^2). ETC is based on the following assumptions: 1) all three datasets are linearly related to the true state (*T*); 2) zero error cross-correlation exists between *X*, *Y* and *Z*; and 3) zero correlation exists between errors and *T* and 4) the stationary of signal and error statistics (Gruber *et al*. 2016a; Draper *et al*. 2013; Zwieback *et al*. 2012). If these assumptions hold, the correlation between *X* and the *T* can be estimated as

$$\rho_{T,X}^2 = \frac{\sigma_{XY}\,\sigma_{XZ}}{\sigma_X^2\,\sigma_{YZ}} \qquad (1)$$

where σ_{XY} is the covariance of *X* and *Y*, and σ_X^2 is the variance of *X*. Analytical details for deriving (1) from the classic TC method (Stoffelen 1998) can be found in McColl (2014).

To ensure consistency with the assumption listed above, seasonal signals are commonly removed from the raw time-series of each product prior to the application of TC (Gruber *et al*. 2016a; Dorigo *et al*. 2010; Su and Ryu, 2015). Here, anomaly time series are generated by removing the average value of a 30-day moving window centered upon the data point being treated (i.e. from day -14 to day +15). Given the potential temporally sparse nature of satellite retrievals, a minimum of 3 observations is required in each of the first and second halves of the 30-day window, in addition to the data point being treated itself. This particular anomaly definition, versus the alternative definition of deviations from a long-term seasonal climatology, has less stringent requirements regarding the length of datasets, which is usually the limiting factor in the application of TC in satellite products. While the removal of low-frequency variability has been shown to improve the robustness of TC results (Chen *et al*. 2017), it renders our particular ETC approach insensitive to (potentially-important) error in low-frequency and/or seasonal soil moisture dynamics. The implications of this will be discussed below.

ETC-based estimates of correlation are considered viable when: 1) the collocated triple time series is comprised of at least 50 data points; 2) positive correlation is found between each of the three input anomaly time-series, and 3) ETC correlation outputs are real and positive for each of the three datasets. All other ETC correlation estimates are masked. The positive correlation requirement between input datasets (#2 above) is necessary to avoid ambiguity since ETC is unable to resolve the sign of the output R values (McColl 2014). This limitation results in the exclusion of pixels in certain regions where active and passive soil moisture retrievals are negatively correlated (see additional discussion in Section 5).

2.2 Estimation of error cross-correlation: Quadruple collocation

As noted above, a potential source of error for the TC analysis is the presence of error cross-correlation (ECC) between the soil moisture datasets, especially between active and passive remote sensing products. Non-zero ECC violates the underlying TC assumptions and can lead to biased TC results. In past studies, ECC was typically assumed to be zero between all products (e.g., Leroux *et al*. 2013). However, recent works have revealed the presence of non-zero ECC between active and passive soil moisture retrievals (Gruber *et al*. 2016b; Pierdicca *et al*. 2017). Therefore, it is prudent to re-examine ECC levels in SMAP-ASCAT and SMOS-ASCAT soil moisture data pairs utilized here.

The TC algorithm can be extended to include a fourth dataset (i.e., quadruple collocation, or QC) and the error variances can be estimated with a least squares solution (Pierdicca *et al*. 2015) with the same TC assumptions. Furthermore, the zero ECC assumption can be relaxed, and ± on the condition that only one pair within of the four datasets have non-zero ECC ± estimates of ECC can be obtained from the least-squares solution (Zwieback *et al*. 2012; Gruber *et al*. 2016b).

Here we adopt the formulation in Gruber *et al*. (2016b) to estimate the error cross-correlation between the active (ASCAT) and passive (SMAP, SMOS) soil moisture datasets and assess the impact of such cross-correlation on TC results. The QC analysis is conducted at sparse soil moisture network sites where ground observations can serve as the fourth soil moisture dataset. The QC formulation also provides estimates of the error variances of each dataset. In certain cases, such estimates will be more accurate than those obtained from TC since QC can account for the presence of non-zero ECC within a particular pair of collocated datasets (Yilmaz and Crow, 2014).

Given four soil moisture measurement systems *X*, *Y*, *Z*, *W*, representing a passive remote sensing, an active remote sensing, a model and point-scale ground observation, respectively, the least-squares solution for the QC problem is given by

[illegible] (2)

where g is the true soil moisture signal, and *b* is the multiplicative bias of a given dataset as in [illegible], and *e* is the zero-mean random error.

And the least squares solution for the parameters in x is given as

[illegible] (3)

Note that this solution enables the TC approach described in section 2.1 to be slightly relaxed. In particular, non-zero ECC is now allowed in one data pair (here between *X* and *Y*, where *X* is SMAP or SMOS, and *Y* is ASCAT). ECC between any other data pairs are still required to be zero (i.e., [illegible] and [illegible]). As in Gruber *et al*. (2016b), we consider these conditions generally satisfied in the active-passive-LSM-*in situ* data quadruples in this study.

2.3 Confidence interval from moving block bootstrapping

Using collocated surface soil moisture retrievals from passive (SMAP or SMOS) and active (ASCAT) sensors and a land surface modeling product, the correlation metric of the three satellite products (versus an unknown truth) can be estimated via TC at a quasi-global scale. However, considerable sampling errors are expected in TC results, especially when the length of the analysis is shortened to accommodate new satellite products (e.g., the two years of SMAP considered here). Therefore, it is critical to account for sampling uncertainties when making comparisons between the satellite products.

Here, such uncertainties are quantified via bootstrap re-sampling at each pixel to construct the confidence interval (CI) of TC estimates. As noted earlier, auto-correlation in time-series will reduce the effective sample size and thus underestimate the probability that the original bootstrap confidence interval contains the true statistical property (Zwiers, 1990; von Storch and Zwiers, 1999). Since soil moisture time series typically contain large amounts of temporal auto-correlation, this effect should be considered when generating boot-strapped errors estimates for soil moisture TC results. Although mean 30-day signals have been removed from the original time-series, our analysis suggests the resulting anomaly time-series still contains significant first-order autocorrelation (not shown). This impact also applies for correlation estimated by ETC [illegible] correlation coefficient formula from two to three time series members (McColl, 2014). A solution is proposed in Mudelsee (2002, 2010) where a pair-wise moving block bootstrap (MBB) re-sampling technique is applied to obtain a robust estimate of the confidence intervals IRU3HDUVRQ¶VFRUUHODWLRQ coefficient in serially-correlated time-series.

Here, we have adapted the MBB method introduced in Ólafsdóttir and Mudelsee (2014) for the bi-variate correlation problem to the triple collocation problem to construct the confidence interval of the ETC correlation results. In each iteration of the re-sampling procedure, MBB is applied to draw blocks of data triplets from the original time series samples to form samples that preserve the temporal persistence of the original data. Block length is determined from the equivalent autocorrelation coefficient of the three anomaly time-series (i.e., ETC inputs) which is calculated from individual persistence time, τ of the three time-series. Persistence times are then estimated by minimizing the sum of squares:

$$S(\tau) = \sum_{i=2}^{n} \left[x(i) - x(i-1) \cdot \exp\left\{ -\left[t(i) - t(i-1) \right] / \tau \right\} \right]^2 \quad (4)$$

where *n* is the length of the time-series, *x*(*i*) is the *i*th data point (i.e. soil moisture anomaly) and *t(i)* is the linear time point (in unit of day) with uneven spacing, which is typical of satellite retrievals. Note that although the land surface model time-series are evenly spaced with sub-daily frequency, only the data points that temporally matched to the satellite retrievals are considered and thereby treated as an unevenly-spaced time series. The equivalent AR(1) autocorrelation coefficient is given by $\hat{a} = \exp(-\bar{d}/\hat{\tau})$, where $\bar{d} = [t(n) - t(1)]/(n-1)$ is the average time spacing. The autocorrelation coefficient is then bias-corrected to approximate the AR(1) process with an even time-spacing:

$$\hat{a}' = \left[\hat{a}(n-1) + 1 \right] / (n-4). \quad (5)$$

A joint, bias-corrected equivalent autocorrelation coefficient for the triple collocation analysis is given by

$$\hat{a}'_{joint} = \left(\hat{a}'_1 \cdot \hat{a}'_2 \cdot \hat{a}'_3 \right)^{1/3}. \quad (6)$$

The optimal block length is then estimated as

$$\hat{b}_{opt} = \mathrm{NINT}\left[\left(\frac{2\hat{G}^2}{\hat{D}}\right)^{1/3} N^{1/3}\right] \qquad (7)$$

where NINT denotes rounding to the nearest integer. Overlapping blocks of data triplets with the length of $\hat{b}_{opt}$ are then extracted from the match-up anomaly time-series and then randomly drawn with replacement to be concatenated until the original data length is reached (see Figure 1 for an illustration of this procedure). Extra data points in the end of the newly-formed bootstrap sample are trimmed. The re-sampling procedure is repeated 1000 times in each grid pixel. Estimated 95% confidence intervals for each correlation coefficient are defined as the range between 2.5th and 97.5th percentile of the bootstrapped sampling distribution.

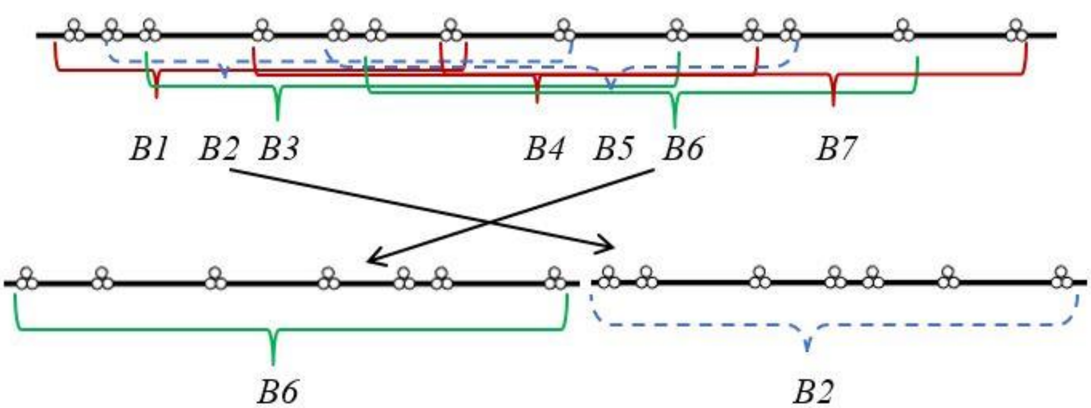

Figure 1. Schematic diagram of moving block bootstrapping for the case $\hat{b}_{opt} = 7$ applied to a temporally sporadic time series of available soil moisture triplets. Overlapping data blocks from the original time series (top) are drawn randomly with replacement and then concatenated to generate a new bootstrap resample (bottom).

and ASCAT (averaged from SMAP- and SMOS-based TC) retrievals over common pixels are 0.76, 0.66 and 0.63, respectively.

Figure 9. Comparison of TC-estimated correlation coefficients between the satellite retrieval products. Color shade indicates the product that obtains higher R in more than 95% of the bootstrap re-sampling

runs in a given grid cell. All areas of non-significant differences are masked. Plotted results are based on the following triplets: a) [SMAP-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMAP) vs. [SMOS-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMOS); b) [SMAP-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMAP and ASCAT); and c) [SMOS-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMOS and ASCAT).

As noted in Section 4, it is likely that *R* values in Figures 8 and 9 are uniformly biased high (on the order of 0.05 to 0.10 [-]) due to low amounts of ECC in SMAP-ASCAT and SMOS-ASCAT pairs. However, relative *R* comparisons between products are expected to be more robust. Qualitative comparisons between the satellite products are presented in Fig. 9, in which only pixels with 95% significance of comparison are shown. Superiority at 95% significance is achieved when one product has higher *R* value in more than 95% of the bootstrap re-samples. Each bootstrap replicate is treated as an independent sample and the *i*th sample TC result for SMAP is compared with the *i*th sample result for SMOS. In this way, approximately two-thirds of the pixel-wise *R* differences are identified as being significant (see Table 2).

The two L-band passive soil moisture products are compared in Fig. 9a. SMOS out-performs SMAP in areas of the Western United States, Southern Argentina, Central Asia and Eastern [illegible] [illegible] dominate the rest of the globe. Globally, the SMAP correlation is significantly higher than SMOS in 47% of the land pixels where comparisons are available, while SMOS is significantly higher in 14% of the pixels (Table 2). In areas of generally strong RFI pollution (e.g., Europe), the aggressive RFI mitigation efforts applied to SMAP retrievals (Mohammed *et al*. 2016; Johnson *et al*. 2016; Piepmeier *et al*. 2017) may explain their superior performance versus SMOS.

The SMOS-ASCAT comparison shows a relatively even number of pixels being superior. SMOS correlation is significantly higher in most of United States, Central Asia and east Australia, whereas ASCAT is better in most of Northeastern China, Western Europe (areas SMOS suffers severe RFI contamination), Argentina, and Western Australia. Considering both products have been extensively validated and are relatively mature, the comparison in Fig. 9c suggests a distinct strength of each product that has been firmly established in specific regions. The spatial pattern of these comparisons is largely consistent with Al-Yaari *et al.* (2014), which compared SMOS L3 and ASCAT with the Modern-Era Retrospective analysis for Research and Applications (MERRA-Land) surface soil moisture (except in Western Australia and Argentina where SMOS is found to correlate better with MERRA-Land than ASCAT).

C-band active scatterometer retrievals from ASCAT are outperformed by SMAP in most areas except for Northeastern China, Southern Argentina and Southwestern Australia, where ASCAT retrievals demonstrate higher R (Fig. 9b). ASCAT R is significantly higher than SMAP R in only 14% of the pixels where TC results are available, while SMAP is significantly better than ASCAT at more than 50% of the available global land pixels. Note that both SMOS and ASCAT data used here were subject to processing errors due to grid transformation (to the SMAP native grid), which may cause slight under-performance and benefit SMAP in these comparisons. However, the slight global superiority of SMAP relative to SMOS is consistent with SMAP validation results at core validation sites (Chan *et al.* 2016).

The relative performance of SMAP versus SMOS could be impacted by (somewhat arbitrary) decisions regarding data flagging and thresholds for estimated quality measures. Here, the sensitivity of TC results to the SMOS data screening rules is examined by experimenting with a stricter DQX threshold (0.04 m^3/m^3). Currently, a less-stringent SMOS DQX threshold (0.07 m^3/m^3) is applied to include more retrievals and increase the sample size for TC. As suggested in Table 2, more than 5000 pixels (or 14.4%) were removed by applying a DQX = 0.04 m^3/m^3 threshold in the TC analysis. Results show that the default threshold (DQX = 0.07 m^3/m^3) leads to a slight increase in the 'SMAP better' pixel classification relative to the DQX = 0.04 m^3/m^3 case (which favors SMAP in ~7% of all the common available pixels); however, it does not reduce the frequency of 'SMOS better' pixels as much (only ~2% pixels affected). In addition, only 0.3% of the common pixels change from a 'SMOS better' to a 'SMAP better' category when the DQX threshold is relaxed from 0.04 m^3/m^3 to 0.07 m^3/m^3. Therefore, our default DQX threshold results in only a small negative impact on SMOS performance relative to SMAP.

Table 2. Pair-wise comparisons between TC-estimated correlation coefficients for various satellite products. The significance of differences is assessed using a 95% confidence threshold and the boot-strapping approach described in Section 2.3. Percentages are out of all global land pixels with viable TC estimates (see Section 2.1).

	SMAP higher		**SMOS** higher		No. pixels
	sig.	non-sig.	sig.	non-sig.	
SMAP vs. SMOS*	**47%**	31%	**14%**	17%	28294
SMAP vs. SMOS**	**40%**	23%	**17%**	20%	24614
	SMAP higher		**ASCAT** higher		
SMAP vs. ASCAT	**53%**	19%	**14%**	14%	39181
	SMOS higher		**ASCAT** higher		
SMOS* vs. ASCAT	**35%**	18%	**29%**	18%	36520
SMOS** vs. ASCAT	**41%**	19%	**23%**	17%	31264

4P ^{3}/m^3'4;P ^{3}/m^3

Figure 10. The satellite product (SMAP, SMOS or ASCAT) with the highest single-run TC-based correlation coefficient.

A map showing the best-performing satellite product is presented in Fig. 10. Note that regions with dense vegetation are largely masked due to a lack of successful retrievals. Likewise, in arid regions such as the Sahara Desert and Great Basin Desert, earlier studies have revealed poor or even negative correlation between active and passive products (de Jeu *et al.* 2008; Pierdicca *et al*. 2013; Burgin *et al*. 2017). This limits the area over which TC can be performed due to the masking of pixels where negative mutual correlation exists among the input datasets (see Section 2.1). As indicated above, ASCAT R values obtained from SMAP- and SMOS-based TC analyses are averaged for comparison. Overall, SMAP and SMOS are superior to ASCAT in most areas of North America, Europe, Southern Asia and Eastern Australia. The significant overlap of geographic regions where both passive satellites are generally consistent with the high level of correlation between SMAP and SMOS found earlier by Burgin *et al*. (2017). ASCAT generally performs better than SMAP and SMOS across high-latitude areas of Eastern Asia, parts of South America (mainly Argentina) and Southwestern Australia. As in Fig. 9, SMOS has higher *R* than SMAP in the Western United States, Central Asia and most inland pixels of Eastern Australia. Overall, SMAP ranks highest in 52% of the pixels with viable TC results (see Section 2.1) whereas SMOS and ASCAT each does in 24% of these pixels.

6. Summary

In this analysis, a global assessment and comparison of SMAP (L2 passive), SMOS (L3) and ASCAT (L2) surface soil moisture products is performed based on the correlation metric (*R*) obtained via triple collocation (TC). In order to produce robust TC results, *R* is estimated following removal of low-frequency variability in the soil moisture time series and therefore reflects the *R* of soil moisture anomalies relative to a 30-day moving temporal average. Given that low-frequency error sources have been previously identified in certain remotely-sensed soil moisture products (Wagner *et al*., 2014), this focus on solely high-frequency noise represents a limitation in our approach. Nevertheless, sensitivity experiments suggest that our global TC results are relatively insensitive to changing the size of the moving window from 30 to 60 days (not shown).

In addition, when comparing satellite products, it is critical to account for the sampling uncertainties due to sparse temporal availabilities or suboptimal retrieval conditions. To this end, a moving-block bootstrap re-sampling approach, with emphasis on preserving the temporal properties of the original soil moisture time series, was applied to each grid pixel to construct the confidence interval for TC *R* estimates. The resampled distribution of correlation estimates is then used to obtain the significance of TC-based *R* differences between SMAP, SMOS and ASCAT soil moisture retrieval products.

Concern about the violation of TC assumption due to error cross-correlations between active-passive observations and between satellite and model products is addressed via a quadruple collocation (QC) analysis conducted within available sparse network sites (Fig. 2). Slight positive error cross-correlation is found to exist between ASCAT and both SMAP and SMOS which suggests that TC-estimated *R* for the three satellite-based products may be positively biased. However, since this bias is small and approximately equal for all three products, the relative evaluation against each other changes only slightly from QC to TC. Results also indicate limited impact associated with potential satellite-model error cross-correlations. Recent findings by Pierdicca *et al*. (2017) using a novel extended QC algorithm and 15 months of satellite and model data reveals weak SMAP-SMOS ECC that is lower than the SMAP-ASCAT ECC found. Such findings suggest the further potential of using SMAP and SMOS together in TC in future analyses. Finally, the sensitivity of SMOS TC results to the specification of the DQX threshold is shown to be low.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to present a global-scale triple collocation analysis that compares the footprint-scale correlation metric of SMAP with SMOS and ASCAT soil moisture products. Results suggest that, out of these three products, SMAP has the highest global average *R* (0.76, SMOS: 0.66, ASCAT: 0.63) and is the superior product for the majority (52%) of global land pixels with a viable TC result. This finding is consistent with several recent validation studies (e.g. Kumar *et al*. 2017; Montzka *et al*. 2017; Pierdicca *et al*. 2017; Kim *et al*.

2018). For example, using an information theory-based metric, SMAP has also been found to provide higher information content than other microwave satellite soil moisture products (Kumar et al. 2017). Likewise, in a validation study applying both standard validation methods and triple collocation of large-scale soil moisture measurements from the Cosmic Ray Neutron Probes (CRNP, including some of the COSMOS stations used here) across five continents, SMAP outperformed other satellite products including AMSR2, SMOS and ASCAT (Montzka et al. 2017). Nevertheless, each of the three satellite retrieval products (SMAP, SMOS and ASCAT) were found to be superior (to the other two) in specific global land regions. Therefore, the global inter-comparison maps in Figures 9 and 10 provide useful information for regional-scale applications such as the choice of dataset for assimilation into rainfall-runoff models.

In closing, it should be noted that all products considered here are subject to frequent re-processing and algorithm improvements. For example, a new global daily SMOS SM product -- the SMOS-INRA-CESBIO (SMOS-IC) product was recently released and shown to yield generally higher correlations versus ground observation versus the v300 SMOS Level 3 soil moisture product considered here (Fernandez-Moran et al., 2017). Comparable enhanced SMAP soil moisture products are likely to arise in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the cross evaluation efforts described here are, in reality, an on-going effort requiring updating as improved products are released.

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SMOS); b) [SMAP-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMAP and ASCAT); and c) [SMOS-ASCAT-ECMWF] (for SMOS and ASCAT).

Figure 10. The satellite product (SMAP, SMOS or ASCAT) with the highest TC-based correlation coefficient (4⁄0, bootstrap mean).