Defining stratospheric sudden warming in climate models: Accounting for biases in model climatology

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A sudden stratospheric warming (SSW) is often defined as zonal-mean zonal wind reversal at 10 hPa and 60°N. This simple definition has been applied not only to the reanalysis data but also to climate model output. In the present study, it is shown that the application of this definition to models can be significantly influenced by model mean biases; i.e., more frequent SSWs appear to occur in models with a weaker climatological polar vortex. In order to overcome this deficiency, a tendency-based definition, is proposed and applied to the multi-model data sets archived for the Coupled Model Intercomparison Projection phase 5 (CMIP5). In this definition, SSW-like events are defined by sufficiently strong vortex deceleration. This approach removes a linear relationship between SSW frequency and intensity of climatological polar vortex in the CMIP5 models. Models' SSW frequency instead becomes correlated with the climatological upward wave flux at 100 hPa. Lower stratospheric wave activity and downward propagation of stratospheric anomalies to the troposphere are also reasonably well captured. However, in both definitions, the high-top models generally exhibit more frequent SSWs than the low-top models. Moreover, a hint of more frequent SSWs in a warm climate is commonly found.

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