Downscaling of surface wind forecasts using convolutional neural networks

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Abstract. Near-surface winds over complex terrain generally feature a large variability at the local scale. Forecasting these winds requires high-resolution Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) models, which drastically increases the duration of simulations and hinders to run them on a routine basis. Nevertheless, downscaling methods can help forecasting such wind flows at limited numerical cost. In this study, we present a statistical downscaling of WRF wind forecasts over south-eastern France (including the south-western part of the Alps) from its original 9-km resolution onto a 1-km resolution grid (1-km NWP model outputs are used to fit our statistical models). Downscaling is performed using convolutional neural networks (CNNs), which are the most powerful machine learning tool for processing images or any kind of gridded data, as demonstrated by recent studies dealing with wind forecasts downscaling. The previous studies mostly focused on testing new model architectures. In this study, we aimed to extend these works by exploring different output variables and their associated loss function. We found that there is no one approach that outperforms the others on both the direction and the speed at the same time. Finally, the best overall performance is obtained by combining two CNNs, one dedicated to the direction forecast, based on the calculation of the normalized wind components using a customized mean squared error (MSE) loss function, and the other dedicated to the speed forecast, based on the calculation of the wind components and using another customized MSE loss function. Local-scale, topography-related wind features, which were poorly forecast at 9 km, are now well reproduced, both for speed (e.g. acceleration on the ridge, leeward deceleration, sheltering in valleys) and direction (deflection, valley channeling). There is a general improvement in the forecast, especially during the nighttime stable stratification period, which is the most difficult period to forecast. It results that, after downscaling, the wind speed bias is reduced from -0.55 m·s^{-1} to -0.01 m·s^{-1}, the wind speed MAE is reduced from 1.02 m·s^{-1} to 0.69 m·s^{-1} (32% reduction), and the wind direction MAE is reduced from 25.9^o to 15.5^o (40% reduction) in comparison with the 9-km resolution forecast.

1 Introduction

Over complex terrain, topography and near surface processes affect low level winds: slope winds resulting from spatial thermal differences along sloping terrain; deviation around hills; channeling in valleys; speedup on mountain crests and acceleration across gaps and passes (Whiteman, 2000). It results that winds generally feature complex structures at the local scale. In consequence, forecasting these winds requires high-resolution (HR) Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) models in order

to represent the complexity of the topography and its local impact on the flow. This can be achieved through dynamical downscaling, that is to say by using an HR NWP model on a limited domain forced by a lower-resolution forecast (Schmidli et al., 2018; de Bode et al., 2021). However, applying such methods over a relatively large domain and for long time periods drastically increases the duration of simulations and hinders the ability to run them on a routine basis.

Other downscaling methods can help forecasting such wind flows at limited numerical cost. TopoSCALE (Fiddes and Gruber, 2014) and WindNinja (Wagenbrenner et al., 2016) are two physically-based downscaling schemes which formulate physical principles to account for the effect of a high-resolution topography on boundary-layer meteorology. Both provide wind forecast downscaling (albeit with some limitations) at a limited computational cost compared to NWP models (Fiddes and Gruber, 2014; Wagenbrenner et al., 2016; Kruyt et al., 2022). The other main downscaling approach is statistical downscaling. Contrary to physically-based models, such methods take advantage of past observations or HR forecasts, bringing local wind information, which can help reproducing the local-scale flow structure. Several methods have been applied to weather forecast downscaling: generalized additive models for wind components (Salameh et al., 2009), random forests for wind speed (Zamo et al., 2016), artificial neural networks (ANNs) for wind components (Dupuy et al., 2021a) (see Vannitsem et al. (2021) for a recent overview).

Over the past decades, ANNs have become one of the most widely used machine learning methods and have transformed many fields (e.g., image recognition, automatic translation, etc.), including science. Convolutional neural networks (CNNs) (LeCun et al., 2015) are a special kind of neural networks designed to extract hierarchical features from grid-like data, making them the state-of-the-art machine learning techniques for complex image processing like image super-resolution which consists in generating an HR image from a low-resolution (LR) image (see Yang et al. (2019) and Kulkarni et al. (2022) for an overview). Therefore, CNNs appear to be a suitable tool to work with geophysical data issued from numerical models in order to extract spatial features, as well as to perform a downscaling. The atmospheric research community has already taken advantage of CNNs ability for diverse applications (see Reichstein et al. (2019) for an overview) including NWP output postprocessing (Vandal et al., 2018; Lagerquist et al., 2019; Dupuy et al., 2021b) and statistical downscaling (see Leinonen et al. (2021) and Harris et al. (2022) for two examples on precipitation forecasts), CNNs outperforming other traditional methods in these studies.

However, studies dealing with statistical downscaling of both wind speed and direction forecast using CNNs are rare. Höhlein et al. (2020), Miralles et al. (2022) and Le Toumelin et al. (2023a, b) used a 2D-to-2D architecture producing a downscaled 2D field from LR 2D fields issued from a NWP model. Miralles et al. (2022) used a generative adversarial network (GAN), designed to produce realistic looking fields while Höhlein et al. (2020) and Le Toumelin et al. (2023a, b) both used a classic U-Net architecture, although they applied different training approaches: Höhlein et al. (2020) directly trained their model using HR and LR forecasts while Le Toumelin et al. (2023a, b) first trained their model using HR and LR output from simulations of idealized conditions (controlled atmospheric conditions and idealized topographies), and then applied it to their real world LR forecasts. On the other hand, Dujardin and Lehning (2022) used a 2D-to-point architecture, meaning that their CNN uses 2D fields data to calculate the wind at a single point (the center of the input 2D data). This singular approach derives from the ground truth data they use, which come from weather stations observations, contrary to the 2D-to-2D approach where target

data are coming from NWP models. Nevertheless, Dujardin and Lehning (2022) also produced 2D wind fields (on a grid with a horizontal resolution as fine as 50 m) by providing their model with input data centered on different locations. It has to be noted that HR and LR do not refer to the same scales in these studies. Downscaling was performed from 31 km to 9 km (ratio close to 3) in Höhlein et al. (2020), from 25 km to 1.1 km (ratio close to 20) in Miralles et al. (2022), from 1.1 km to 50 m (ratio close to 20) in Dujardin and Lehning (2022) and from 1.3 km to 30 m (ratio close to 40) in Le Toumelin et al. (2023a, b).

Moreover, Le Toumelin et al. (2023b) and Miralles et al. (2022) only used topographical information as additional predictors to the LR wind forecast while Höhlein et al. (2020) and Dujardin and Lehning (2022) used others meteorological parameters. Thus, meteorological phenomena that are expected to be reproduced should differ. For instance, Miralles et al. (2022), Dujardin and Lehning (2022) and Le Toumelin et al. (2023b) report improvements in the representation of main orographic effects that are not resolved in the larger-scale data, like acceleration on the ridge and sheltering effect. Moreover, Dujardin and Lehning (2022) noted a more realistic wind deflection while Le Toumelin et al. (2023b), as well as Miralles et al. (2022) over the Alps, got only a small impact on the direction from their downscaling.

This study aims to pursue the exploration of new strategies of wind forecast downscaling in line with the works introduced above. We present a 2D-to-2D statistical downscaling approach with the originality that wind variables are calculated by different ways, which generates different wind forecasts. We apply this strategy to WRF wind forecasts over south-eastern France (including the south-western part of the Alps) from their original 9-km horizontal resolution to a 1-km resolution grid (section 2). We evaluate the performances of the different high-resolution forecasts and analyze their own advantages and disadvantages (section 3). Then we present the main conclusions of the study.

2 Methods

2.1 WRF forecasts

The WRF NWP model (Skamarock et al., 2019) was run in a grid-nested mode, with 3 nested domains (Fig. 1): D1 with a 9-km horizontal resolution (152×155 grid points, i.e. 1368×1395 km), covering France and its surroundings (especially to the south and to the east); D2 with a 3-km resolution (99×99 grid points, i.e. 297×297 km); and D3 with a 1-km resolution (99×99 grid points, i.e. 99×99 km), located in southeastern France. WRF was routinely run in this operational forecast mode once a day from the 24 December 2020 to the 5 May 2022, for lead times up to 72 hours. We only used simulations for lead times from 12 to 72 hours (the first 12 hours are considered as the spin-up and are then discarded) resulting in a total of 29036 hourly outputs (after removing some dates for which D3 data are missing). More details on the WRF set up can be found in de Bode et al. (2023).

2.2 Training data

The objective is to downscale the 9-km resolution WRF low-level wind forecasts (called WRF LR, for low resolution, in the following) towards a 1-km resolution over an area corresponding to the D3 domain. The 1-km WRF forecast (called WRF
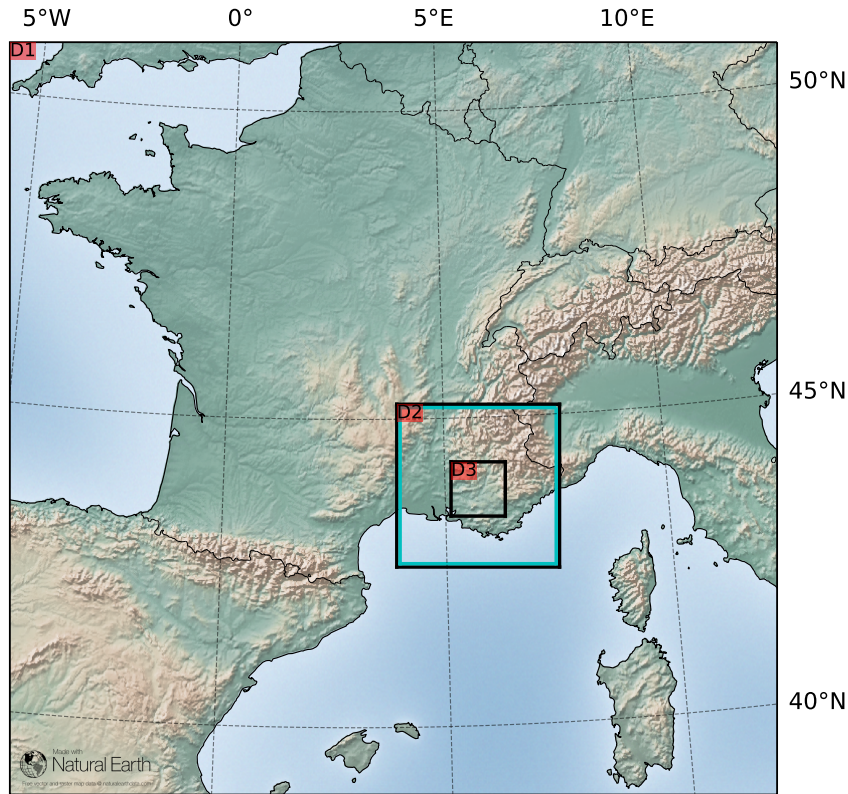
Figure 1. Representation of the 3 nested domains of the WRF model. The blue square represents the 288×288 grid cells area described in section 2.3.

HR, for high resolution, in the following) is considered as the target used to train the statistical models. The wind under consideration throughout this paper is taken at 10 m above the ground.

Wind variables as well as many other variables from the WRF LR forecasts are used as predictors for the CNNs: wind components (u for the eastward component, v for the northward component), wind direction (in degrees both in the range [0; 360], [−180; 180] and [180; 540]) as well as its cosine and sine and wind speed; basic meteorological parameters (2-m temperature and potential temperature, surface pressure and convective and non-convective precipitation); short-wave and long-wave radiation fluxes; stability-related variables (boundary-layer height and friction velocity). Note that numerous predictors are highly influenced by the diurnal cycle (temperature, solar radiation, ...), which justifies that we did not add explicitly time-related predictors like hours in the day.

Besides, in order to incorporate the geographical context, some HR parameters, called "static" since they do not vary in time, such as topography (and difference between the LR and HR topography) and a land/sea mask are added to the list of predictors. Moreover, following the recommendations of Dujardin and Lehning (2022), slope and aspect (orientation of the slope) HR fields calculated from the HR topography are added (see Fig. 2).
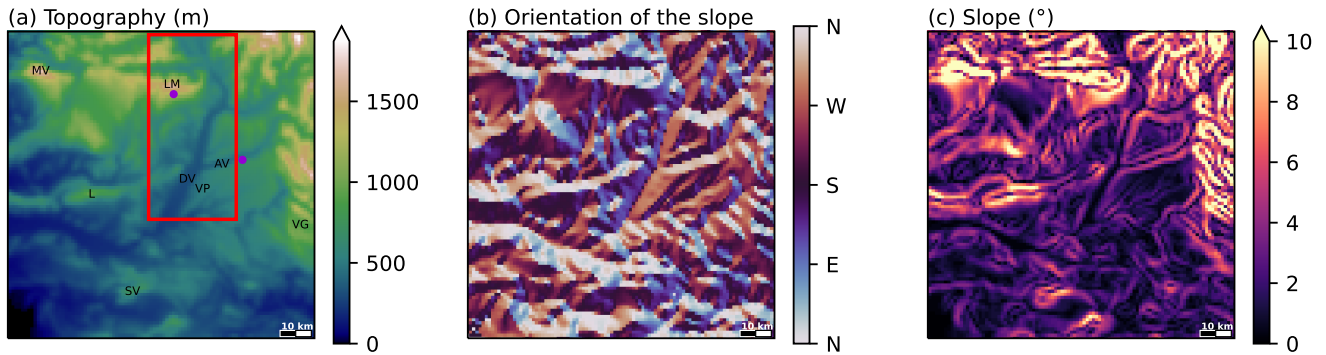
Figure 2. Illustration of static predictors on the D3 domain: (a) topography (in m a.s.l.), (b) orientation of the slope and (c) local slope. The red rectangle on (a) shows the area of the plots on Figs. 6, 7 and 8. Letters refer to some topographical sites: MV for Mont Ventoux, LM for Lure mountain, L for Luberon mountain, DV for Durance valley, VP for Valensole plateau, AV for Asse valley, VG for Verdon Gorge and SV for Sainte-Victoire mountain. The two purple dots indicate the locations of the valley site and crest site depicted on Figs. 9 and 10, respectively.

Finally, we added the new predictors introduced by Dujardin and Lehning (2022), which combine wind and topography information, giving insight on wind–topography interactions. More specifically, they calculate a theoretical correction of the wind components in order to represent the speed modification caused by the exposure/sheltering to the wind, as well as the deflection caused by the relief. The reader can refer to Dujardin and Lehning (2022) for more details. Finally, we have a list of 35 predictors (cf. Table 1) that are all used to train the different CNNs described in the next section.

Table 1. List of variables used as predictors in that study.

Wind-related variables:

Zonal (u) and meridional (v) wind components, wind speed (FF) and direction (in degrees both in the range $[0; 360]$º, $[-180; 180]$º and $[180; 540]$º), cosine and sine of the direction.

Other meteorological variables:

2-m temperature and potential temperature, surface pressure, convective and non-convective precipitation, ongoing longwave and short-wave radiation at the surface, boundary layer height and friction velocity.

Terrain variables:

Topography, difference between the LR and HR topography, land/sea mask, slope and aspect.

Other variables (cf. Dujardin and Lehning, 2022):

Exposure (E_+) and sheltering (E_-) to the wind, $E_+ \times u$, $E_+ \times v$, $E_- \times u$, $E_- \times v$, $E_+ \times FF$, $E_- \times FF$, wind components theoretical modification, as well as the underlying direction, cosine, and sine theoretical modification.

2.3 Convolutional Neural Network architecture

The objective of a neural network (NN) is to find a mathematical function linking a list of predictors to a list of predictants (considered as the truth). The function is composed of neurons (a linear combination of input variables transformed by a so-called activation function) interconnected between each other and arranged in layers. Training the NN consists in fitting its function to produce results as close as possible to the truth (the reader can refer to Goodfellow et al. (2016) for more explanations).

Convolutional layers can be introduced in NN when dealing with grid-like data in order to take advantage of the information contained in spatial structures. In these layers, neurons actually correspond to a convolution function which is applied to a limited part of the grid. NNs using such layers are called convolutional neural networks (CNNs).

In this study, we used a U-Net architecture (Ronneberger et al., 2015), which is a fully convolutional network that generates images from images. Its name comes from its U-shaped architecture in which convolutional layers are separated first with pooling layers and then with transposed convolutional layers. The first phase, with pooling layers, reduces the size of images, which is known to capture the context of input images. The second phase, with transposed convolutional layers, increases the size of the contracted images, enabling a precise localization.

The architecture of the CNN used is described in Fig. 3. Before entering the U-Net, the data follow a two steps process. The LR input data is composed of 32×32 grid points with a resolution of 9 km, corresponding to the blue domain represented in Fig. 1. This domain is larger than the D3 domain in order to incorporate information on a larger spatial scale and thus give more information on the regional atmospheric conditions. These data are then interpolated on the HR grid (288×288 grid points with a resolution of 1 km, using a bicubic interpolation (the red layer in Fig. 3) in order to reduce LR grid patterns artifacts in the outputs of the CNN, then all the predictors are standardized. We used a padding of 1 in order to produce outputs with the same size as inputs although we cropped the 288×288 outputs since we only focus on the $99\,\mathrm{km} \times 99\,\mathrm{km}$ central area corresponding to the D3 domain. In order to avoid overfitting, we added a batch normalization (Ioffe and Szegedy, 2015) and a drop out (Srivastava et al., 2014) after convolutional layers and we introduced an early stopping that stopped the learning when the loss function calculated on an independent validation dataset did not improve on 10 successive epochs. The ReLU activation function is applied after each convolutional layer, except for the final 1×1 convolutional layer in order to produce a not bounded regression. The mean squared error (MSE) is used as loss function. Additional modifications tested are described in the next sections. We used the PyTorch library of Python for the machine learning developments.

2.3.1 Choice of target variables

We are interested not only by the wind speed, as in most studies about wind forecast downscaling, but we also want to calculate the wind direction. However, the direction may be difficult to calculate directly because of its cyclic nature. Circular regression tools are generally based on the von Mises distribution (also called circular normal distribution), but they are challenging to optimize, even if Lang et al. (2020) developed a circular regression tool based on random forests (Breiman, 2001) which simplifies the optimization process. On the other hand, more classic regression approaches, for instance based on the estimation
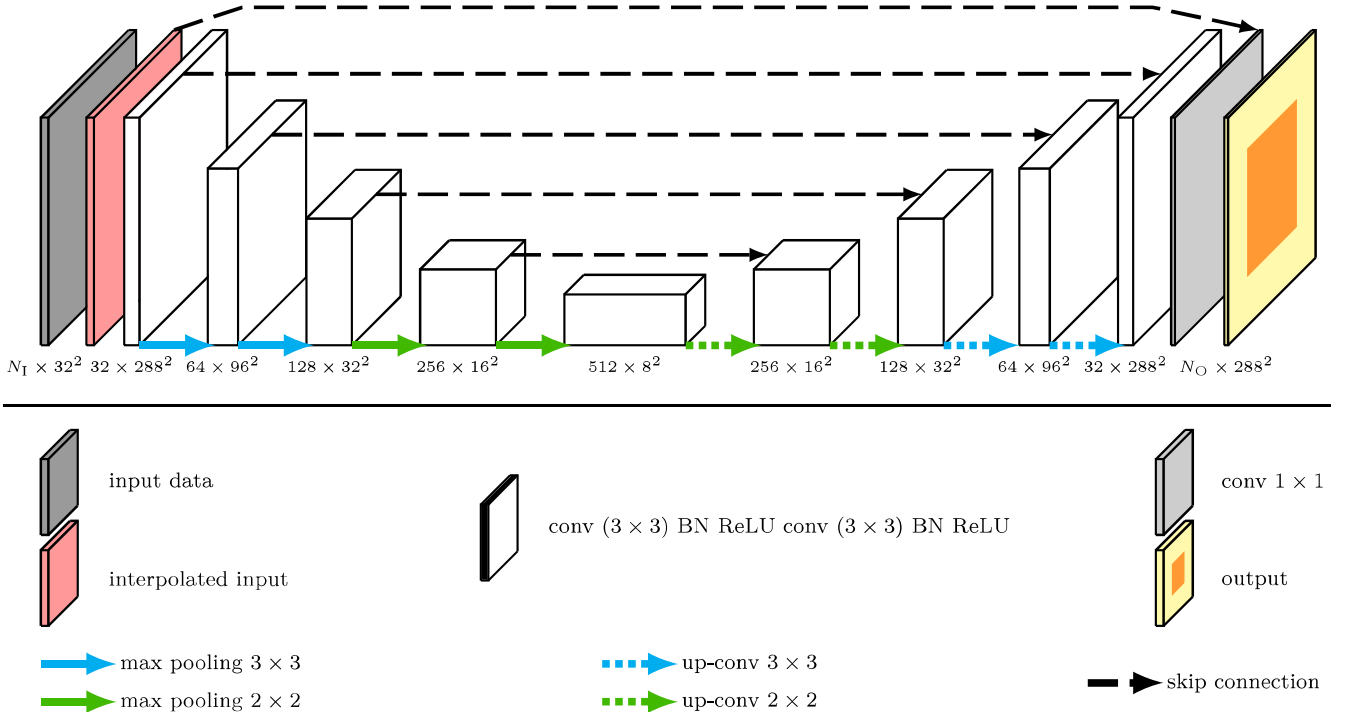
Figure 3. Schematic illustrating the architecture of the CNN used in the study. BN stands for batch normalization. The numbers under the different computation blocs indicate the dimension of the data at different stages of the network at the output of the corresponding bloc. N_I (= 35) and N_O (cf. Table 2) represent the number of input variables and the number of target variables, respectively. On the output, the orange area represents the crop (99×99) from the yellow part (288×288).

of the conditional mean (via the minimization of the mean squared error), seem inappropriate since there is no definition of the mean direction calculated directly on a set of direction values. Despite this, Le Toumelin et al. (2023a) performed a regression calculating directly the direction, which improved their direction forecast, using a cosine distance as loss function (see section
145 2.3.2). We tested their approach via a specific CNN training (this model is called CNN$_{\mathrm{dir}}$ hereafter).

Otherwise, the mean direction can be calculated based on its sine and cosine (or wind components in the case of wind data) values (Jammalamadaka and SenGupta, 2001). That is why it is more common to calculate the wind components when using regression tools (Dupuy et al., 2019, 2021a; Höhlein et al., 2020; Miralles et al., 2022; Dujardin and Lehning, 2022) since they carry information on both speed and direction. We apply this approach in this study. Therefore, the CNN outputs 2 variables
150 aiming at representing the u and v wind components (this model is called CNN$_{u,v}$ hereafter).

Nevertheless, for a given error on any of the two components, the forecast error on the underlying direction varies in function of the speed (the lower the speed, the higher the error on the direction) and direction. It results that direction errors on lighter winds are artificially less penalized than direction errors on larger winds. Knowing that light winds directions are difficult to forecast (with a deterministic model) because of their higher spatial and temporal heterogeneity, this strategy reinforces the

difficulty. The normalization of the components by the wind speed, which gives the cosine and sine values of the direction (noted $\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$), is a way to equally penalize all wind speed conditions. We thus tried to forecast these variables (this model is called $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$) although they do not incorporate any information on the speed which has to be computed in some other way (for instance with the $\text{CNN}_{u,v}$).

2.3.2 Loss function

In our case, the MSE loss produces a negatively biased speed forecast. Dujardin and Lehning (2022) proposed a loss function, inspired by the Pinball function which is used to make quantile regressions, in order to produce unbiased wind speed predictions when they derive from the components (Eq. 1).

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \tau_i \left[(\hat{u}_i - \beta_i u_i)^2 + (\hat{v}_i - \beta_i v_i)^2 \right], \tag{1}$$

$$\beta_i = \frac{\epsilon + \|\mathbf{U}\|_i}{\epsilon + \|\hat{\mathbf{U}}\|_i}, \quad \tau_i = \begin{cases} \tau & \text{if } \|\hat{\mathbf{U}}\|_i \geq \|\mathbf{U}\|_i, \\ 1 - \tau & \text{if } \|\hat{\mathbf{U}}\|_i < \|\mathbf{U}\|_i. \end{cases}$$

with $\hat{u}$ and $\hat{v}$ the CNN outputs wind components, $\|\mathbf{U}\|$ and $\|\hat{\mathbf{U}}\|$ the target and output speed and τ and ϵ two constants. Using values of $\tau = 0.3$ and $\epsilon = 4.3$ m·s^{-1} (these values were chosen after numerous tests), we obtained an unbiased forecast (model called $\text{CNN}_{u,v,\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}}$).

In order to get consistent couples of cosine and sine values when calculating the normalized components, that is to say $\tilde{u}^2 + \tilde{v}^2 = 1$, we tested a loss function combining the classic MSE and the absolute distance between unity and the sum of squared normalized components (Eq. 2):

$$\mathcal{L}_2 = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left[\left(\hat{\tilde{u}}_i - \hat{u}_i \right)^2 + \left(\hat{\tilde{v}}_i - \hat{v}_i \right)^2 + \alpha \left[1 - \left(\hat{\tilde{u}}_i^2 + \hat{\tilde{v}}_i^2 \right) \right] \right], \tag{2}$$

with α a weight to balance the two penalty terms. In our case, $\alpha = 0.2$ is the optimal value. For larger values the cosine/sine values couples were globally more consistent, but at the expense of the direction forecast.

Another way to get consistent $\hat{\tilde{u}}$ and $\hat{\tilde{v}}$ values is to calculate one of them, for instance $\hat{\tilde{u}}$, and derive the other one ($\hat{\tilde{v}}$) based on the $\hat{\tilde{u}}^2 + \hat{\tilde{v}}^2 = 1$ relation. However, this formula does not give the sign of $\hat{\tilde{v}}$, which has then to be calculated in another way. In our test, we used the $\hat{\tilde{u}}$ values and $\hat{\tilde{v}}$ signs from $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ (thus there is no additional CNN training, instead this approach has to be seen as a postprocess of the $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ results) to calculate $\hat{\tilde{v}}$ (Eq. 3, model called $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u} \to \tilde{v}}$ hereafter). Similarly, we calculated $\hat{\tilde{u}}$ based on the $\hat{\tilde{v}}$ values and $\hat{\tilde{u}}$ sign from $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ (model called $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{v} \to \tilde{u}}$ hereafter).

$$\hat{\tilde{v}} = \text{sign} \left(\hat{\tilde{v}}_{\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}} \right) \times \sqrt{1 - \hat{\tilde{u}}^2_{\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}}}, \tag{3}$$

Finally, as described in the previous section, the CNN_{dir} is trained using its own loss function ($\mathcal{L}_{\text{dir}}$), introduced in the study of Le Toumelin et al. (2023a):

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{dir}} = 1 - \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left[\cos\left(\hat{\text{dir}}_i - \text{dir}_i \right) \right], \tag{4}$$

with dir and $\hat{\text{dir}}$ the target and CNN output directions, respectively. A summary of the tests performed in this study is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of models used for downscaling tests.

Name	Output variable(s)	Loss function	N_O
$\text{CNN}_{u,v}$	u and v	MSE	2
$\text{CNN}_{u,v,\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}}$	u and v	$\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}$	2
$\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$	$\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$	MSE	2
$\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$	$\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$	$\mathcal{L}_2$	2
CNN_{dir}	direction	$\mathcal{L}_{\text{dir}}$	1
$\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u} \to \tilde{v}}$	Postprocessing of the $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ outputs (no additional model training needed).		
$\text{CNN}_{\tilde{v} \to \tilde{u}}$	Postprocessing of the $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ outputs (no additional model training needed).		

2.4 Wind forecast evaluation

The performance was evaluated by comparing the difference between the target (deterministic 1-km WRF simulation) and the output of the various CNNs. The improvement brought by the CNNs translates as a reduction of the wind field error with respect to the initial 9-km WRF wind field error. The latter is computed on the difference between the deterministic 1-km WRF simulation and the 9-km WRF wind field projected onto the 1-km grid (on the D3 domain) with a bicubic interpolation. Therefore, in the following, "WRF LR" stands for the 1-km field interpolated from the 9-km WRF forecast.

To evaluate the significance of the results, and considering the relatively small size of our dataset, we performed a k-fold cross validation in order to use as much data as possible during the training while evaluating the models on a large period. For each CNN model tested, 4 (k= 4 for the cross validation) training runs were performed, each using 75% of the dataset for training and the remaining 25% for testing (there is no overlap of data between the 4 test sets, and the test and training sets are completely independent). By combining the results of the 4 training runs, applied to the 4 different test sets, we obtain a test dataset covering the entire period available. Then, we bootstrapped the test dataset, yielding a distribution for each metric, in order to evaluate their dispersion (Wilks, 2011).

We mostly focused on evaluating the wind speed and direction using classic metrics such as the mean absolute error (MAE) and the mean bias error (MBE). Moreover, we compared the accuracy of the wind speed distribution using the earth mover's

distance, also known as the Wasserstein distance (WD). The WD between f and $\hat{f}$, two discrete histograms with samples on N bins and normalized values (in the sense that $\sum_{i=1}^{N} f(i) = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \hat{f}(i) = 1$), is defined as:

$$\mathrm{WD}\left(f, \hat{f}\right) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| F(i) - \hat{F}(i) \right| \tag{5}$$

where F and $\hat{F}$ are the cumulative histograms of f and $\hat{f}$. For the direction distribution, we used a modified version called circular earth mover's distance suited to circular variables (Rabin et al., 2008) defined as:

$$\mathrm{WD}\left(f, \hat{f}\right) = \min_{k \in \{1, \ldots, N\}} \left\{ \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| F_k(i) - \hat{F}_k(i) \right| \right\}, \tag{6}$$

where, $\forall k \in \{1, \ldots, N\}$ (the definition is similar for $\hat{F}_k$ by replacing f by $\hat{f}$):

$$F_k(i) = \begin{cases} \displaystyle\sum_{j=k}^{i} f(j) & \text{if } i \geq k, \\ \displaystyle\sum_{j=k}^{N} f(j) + \sum_{j=1}^{i} f(j) & \text{if } i < k. \end{cases}$$

Finally, we evaluate the spatial heterogeneity of the wind field by calculating the standard deviation of the speed and direction fields for each of the 29036 map samples (one value per sample). For the direction, which is a circular variable, we used the Yamartino (1984) method (Eq. 7):

$$\sigma_{\mathrm{dir}} = \arcsin(\epsilon) \left[1 + \left(\frac{2}{\sqrt{3}} - 1 \right) \epsilon^3 \right], \tag{7}$$

with:

$$\epsilon = \sqrt{1 - (s_a^2 + c_a^2)}; \quad s_a = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sin(\mathrm{dir})_i; \quad c_a = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \cos(\mathrm{dir})_i$$

2.5 Computational considerations

The training of each CNN on a NVidia GeForce GTX TITAN V graphics processing unit (GPU) lasts around 4 hours, but once fitted, it takes only a few seconds to process a lead time of one simulation using one of the CNNs listed in Table 2 on the same GPU, which is valuable considering that operational LR forecasts are available several hours ahead whereas a dynamical downscaling performed with WRF would require hours of computation.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Overall performance of the models

A summary of performance for all the downscaling models is given in Fig. 4. All the CNNs reduce the MAE of the direction and speed, as well as the wind speed bias compared to WRF LR forecasts. However, the bias on the wind components, which is
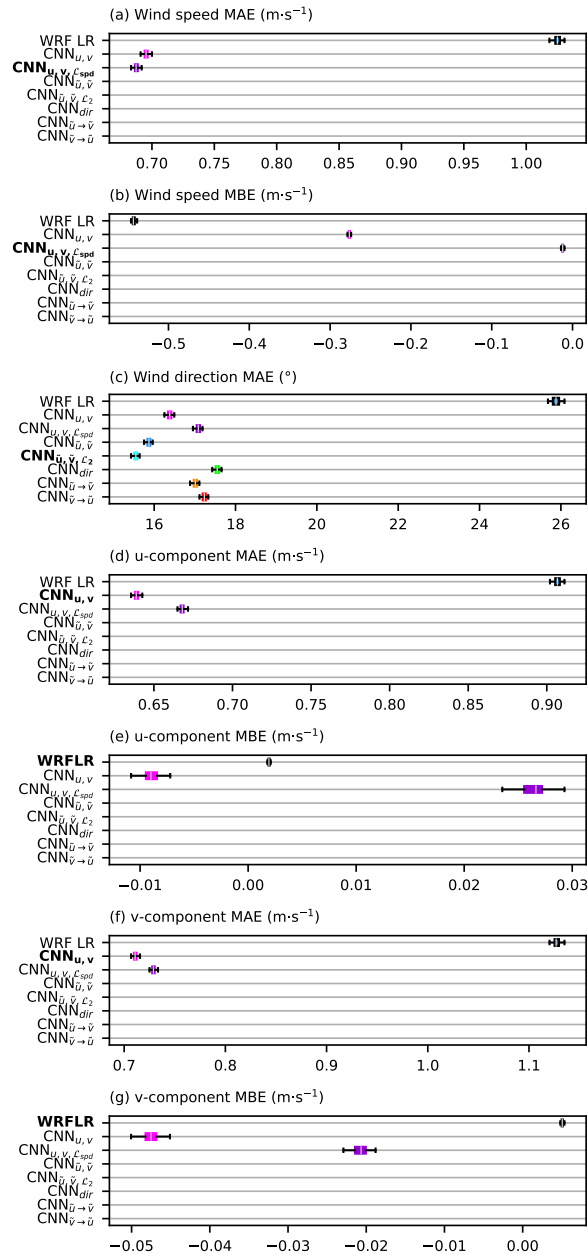
Figure 4. Summary of performance for the different models – (a) wind speed MAE, (b) wind speed MBE, (c) wind direction MAE, (d) u MAE, (e) u MBE, (f) v MAE and (g) v MBE. For each metric, the best-performing model label is written in bold type.

close to zero in WRF LR, is slightly degraded after the downscaling but remains low for all the CNNs (in the range $[-0.05; 0.05]$ m·s^{-1}).

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Concerning the wind speed, the $\text{CNN}_{u,v,\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}}$ is better than the other CNNs, especially for the correction of the negative bias which is reduced to -0.01 m·s^{-1}, demonstrating the ability of the $\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}$ loss function to reduce the bias. However, it has one of the worst performances of all the CNNs on the direction and the components (largest MAE values), meaning that the speed improvement occurs at the expense of a degradation of the forecast of the couple of components.

Concerning the direction, all the CNNs greatly improve the performance with respect to the LR forecast, with a reduction in MAE of the order of 10 degrees. The $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ achieves the best performance. We detail the performance of the different direction forecasts in Fig. 5. On Fig. 5a, we compare the MAEs on the direction according to the wind direction (as computed by WRF HR). The point of this figure is not to focus on the evolution of the MAE in function of the direction for a given model since many factors should be considered (for instance, the MAE is lower for the northwesterly and southeasterly winds because of the higher occurrence of high speeds for which the direction is easier to forecast). Instead, we analyze the differences, for a given direction, between the different models. The $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ and $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ are really close, while the $\text{CNN}_{u,v}$ reaches slightly higher values for southerly winds for unidentified reasons. But above all, the CNN_{dir} behaves singularly, with larger MAE values for winds coming from the NW and NE quadrants while they are close to the other CNNs for the SW and SE quadrants. This is related to an under-prediction of northerly winds, as illustrated in Fig. 5b, which could result from an artifact around the 0–360º numerical discontinuity in the wind direction. It seems that Le Toumelin et al. (2023a, their Fig. 4e) experienced the same issue (important under-estimation of the occurrence of northerly winds), possibly with the same consequence on the wind direction MAE, which confirms that calculating the direction as a direct output is not appropriate, as already explained in section 2.3.1. Besides, calculating $\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$ without any constraint on the couple they form leads to important inconsistencies ($\hat{\tilde{u}}^2 + \hat{\tilde{v}}^2$ should be equal to 1 but is underestimated most of the time, see Fig. 5c), which are partly corrected when using the $\mathcal{L}_2$ loss (with more values close to 1), together with a slight improvement of the direction forecast. On the other hand, the postprocessing of the $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ outputs in order to get $\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$ values that respect the $\hat{\tilde{u}}^2 + \hat{\tilde{v}}^2 = 1$ equality ($\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u} \to \tilde{v}}$ and $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{v} \to \tilde{u}}$) deteriorates the direction forecast, suggesting that inconsistencies between the couples of $\tilde{u}$ and $\tilde{v}$ reduce direction errors somehow. Finally, the geographical difference of MAE between the $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ and the $\text{CNN}_{u,v}$ (Fig. 5d) indicates that the improvement is not homogeneously spread over the domain, but mainly occurs over regions featuring lighter winds in average, generally corresponding to valleys. This behavior was expected since the calculation of the normalized components artificially increases the weight of the direction errors on the lighter winds with respect to the calculation of u and v, as explained in section 2.3.1.

In conclusion, there is no one CNN that outperforms the others. Compared to the classic approach ($\text{CNN}_{u,v}$), the modifications improved either the direction or the speed, but not at the same time. Finally, the best overall performance can be obtained by the combination of $\text{CNN}_{u,v,\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}}$ for the calculation of the speed and $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ for the direction. In the following, "CNN" results refer to such a combination of post-processing results.

3.2 Wind field characteristics

Before evaluating the downscaling overall performance, we illustrate the forecast improvement on two selected cases over a limited area of the D3 domain which is interesting since it encompasses important ridges (e.g. the Lure mountain) and steep
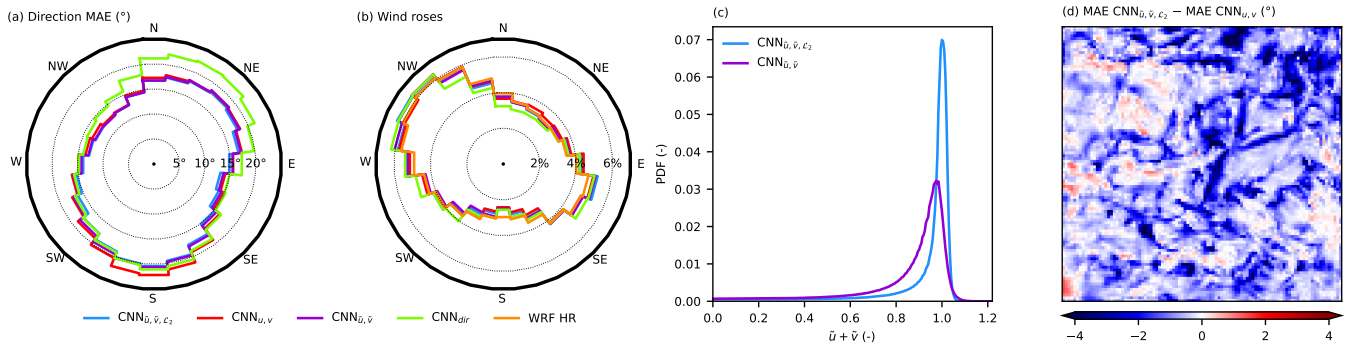
Figure 5. (a) MAE on wind direction according to the wind direction from the HR dataset. (b) Polar distributions of the directions computed by the different models. On (a) and (b), the results of $\text{CNN}_{u,v,\mathcal{L}_{\text{spd}}}$, $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u}\to\tilde{v}}$ and $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{v}\to\tilde{u}}$ are not represented in order to make the figures more readable, and because their performance on the direction is lower. (c) Distribution of $\hat{u}^2 + \hat{v}^2$ values for $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v}}$ and $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$. (d) Difference of MAE on the wind direction between $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ and $\text{CNN}_{u,v}$ (negative values means that $\text{CNN}_{\tilde{u},\tilde{v},\mathcal{L}_2}$ performs better while positive values means that $\text{CNN}_{u,v}$ performs better).

260   local valleys on its northern part, and a smoother topography on its southern part, with the wide Durance valley crossing the area from the north towards the south (see the location of the area in Fig. 2a and its topographical characteristics in Fig. 6). The results for the two cases are presented in Figs. 7 and 8, respectively. These figures are composed of 6 panels split into two rows. There is a classical representation of wind forecasts on the top row (WRF LR (a), WRF HR (b) and CNN (c)) in which the wind is represented with arrows. The bottom row shows the forecast errors of WRF LR (d) and the CNN

265   (f), as well as the correction of the CNN with respect to WRF LR (e): the longer the arrows, the larger the error/difference, while the color of arrows represents the speed error/modification. Therefore, on panels d and f (resp. e), small white arrows indicate a good forecast (resp. a little modified forecast), whereas long white arrows indicate important errors (resp. important modifications) on direction associated to low-speed errors (resp. small modifications). Long red/blue arrows on panels d and f indicate over/under-estimated speeds associated to, either good direction forecast if the orientation of arrows in the WRF

270   LR (panel a) or CNN (panel c) forecast is the same (modulo 180°) as in the error of forecast (panels d or f), or bad direction forecast otherwise. The same logic applies to panel (e) for the correction by the CNN.

     On Fig. 7, the meteorological situation corresponds to a calm night with a weak synoptic forcing. The HR forecast wind field (Fig. 7b) has a high spatial heterogeneity, for both speed and direction, resulting from typical topography-dependent features under stable stratification such as channeled valley winds and down-slope winds, e.g. in the northern part of the domain, as well

275   as around less steep hills, e.g. in the southern part of the domain. The LR forecast (Fig. 7a) also features valley and down-slope winds but in relation to its LR topography (Fig. 6a), that is to say a single wide and flared valley, bending around the only main ridge resolved on the northwest part of the area. This results in important errors of direction and speed around all the unresolved topographical features (Fig. 7d). The CNN output is very different from the LR wind field over the whole area (long arrows on Fig. 7e), with important speed and/or direction modification. The downscaled wind field (Fig. 7c) appears to be very
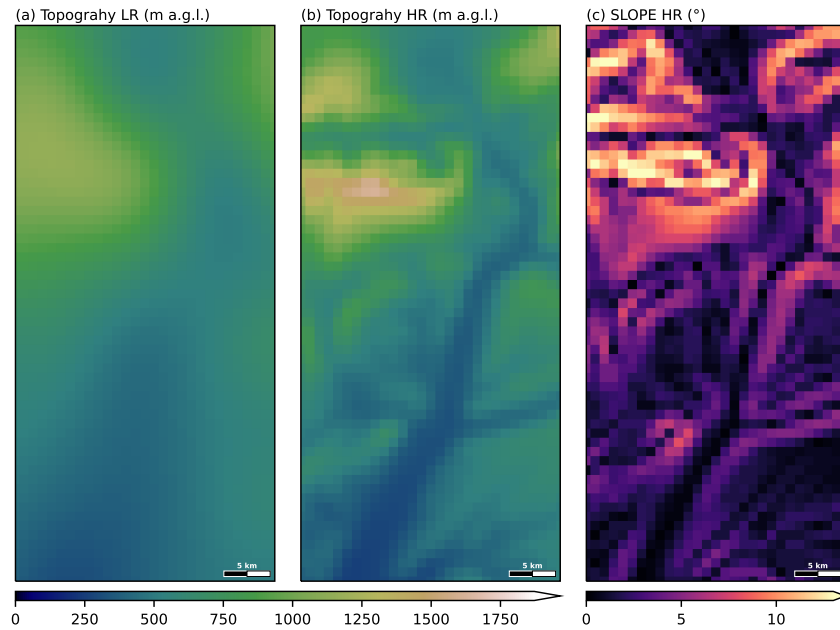
Figure 6. (a) LR topography after a bicubic interpolation towards the 1-km grid, (b) HR topography and (c) HR slope for the area of Figs. 7 and 8 (see the location of the area in Fig 2a).

close to the HR field, with a good representation of all the topography-dependent features, which is confirmed by the errors which are generally very low over the whole area (Fig. 7f).

The meteorological situation presented in Fig. 8 corresponds to a Mistral (regional wind) event, characterized by northwesterly winds at the synoptic scale over the area considered. Over the southern part of the domain, the HR wind field (Fig. 8b) shows a moderate variability with slight deflections and variations in speed around small scale reliefs (acceleration over ridges and leeward deceleration). The LR forecast (Fig. 8a) does not represent these topographical features since local topography vanishes at the 9-km resolution. The wind field is therefore very homogeneous, with small direction changes hence an over-estimation of leeward speeds and an under-estimation windward (Fig. 8d). The CNN only marginally corrects the LR forecast over this area (small arrows in Fig. 8e). The deflection around reliefs (Fig. 8c) as well as the leeward deceleration and ridge acceleration (red arrows windward and blue arrows leeward on Fig. 8e) are only partially represented, resulting in significant errors remaining after downscaling (Fig. 8f).

Over the northern part of the domain, the HR wind field (Fig. 8b) is much more impacted by the topography (which features deeper valleys and hills). It results a flow channeling in narrow valleys, deflections around main hills and a large acceleration over the main ridges. The LR wind field (Fig. 8a) presents features constrained by the highest ridge (the Lure mountain), which is still represented even at the 9-km resolution, with a notable deflection around it as well as a deceleration on the leeward side. However, deflection and acceleration are lower than those in the HR field, which translates as important errors on the speed over the relief (Fig. 8d). Moreover, topographic effects by small hills and valleys are not represented, which generates large
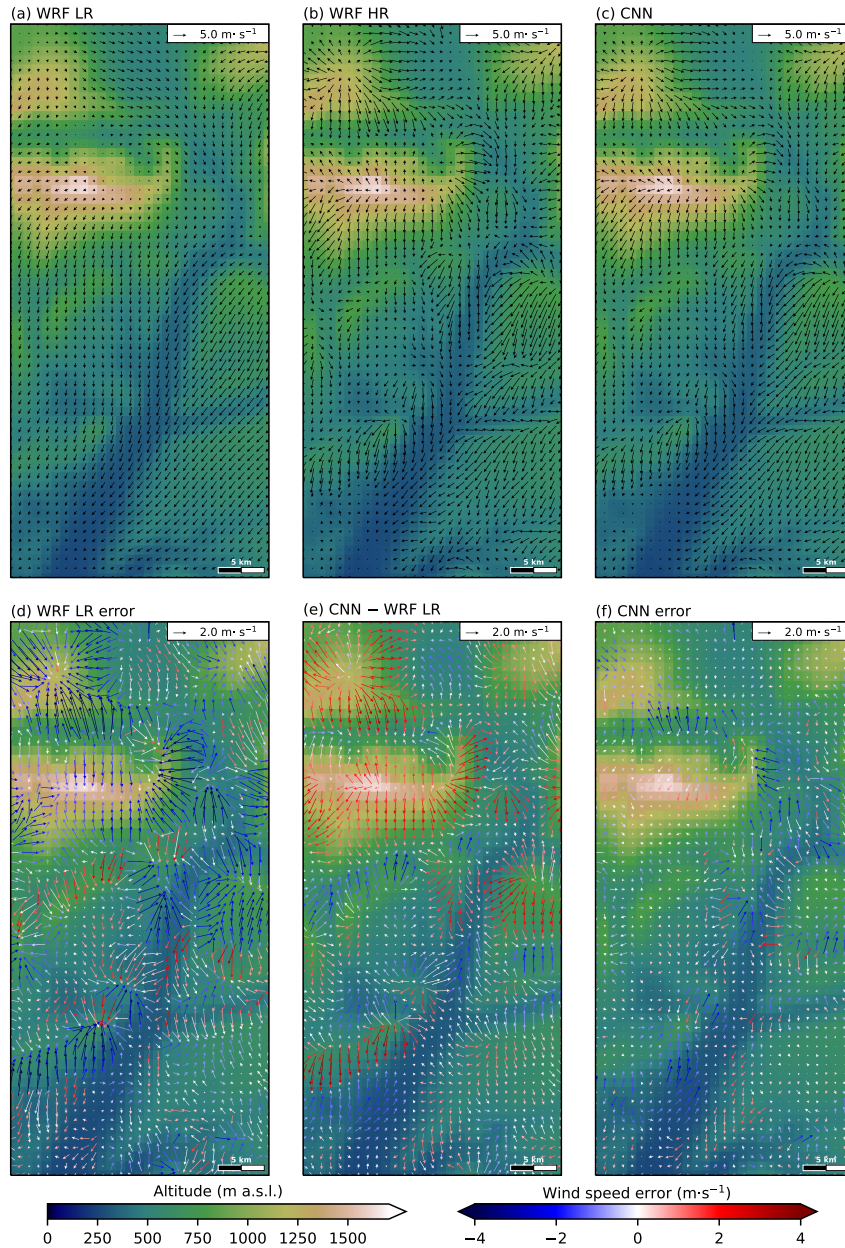
Figure 7. Situation of the 6 January 2021 at 7h UTC (simulation starting at 0h UTC on 5 January 2021, lead time 31h). The area corresponds to the red rectangle in Fig. 2a. Horizontal wind computed by (a) WRF LR, (b) WRF HR and (c) the CNN. Panels (d) and (f) represent the errors corresponding to the wind fields represented in (a) and (c), respectively. Panel (e) represents the vector difference between panels (c) and (a). On panels (d), (e) and (f), the color of the arrows indicates the error/difference in wind speed.
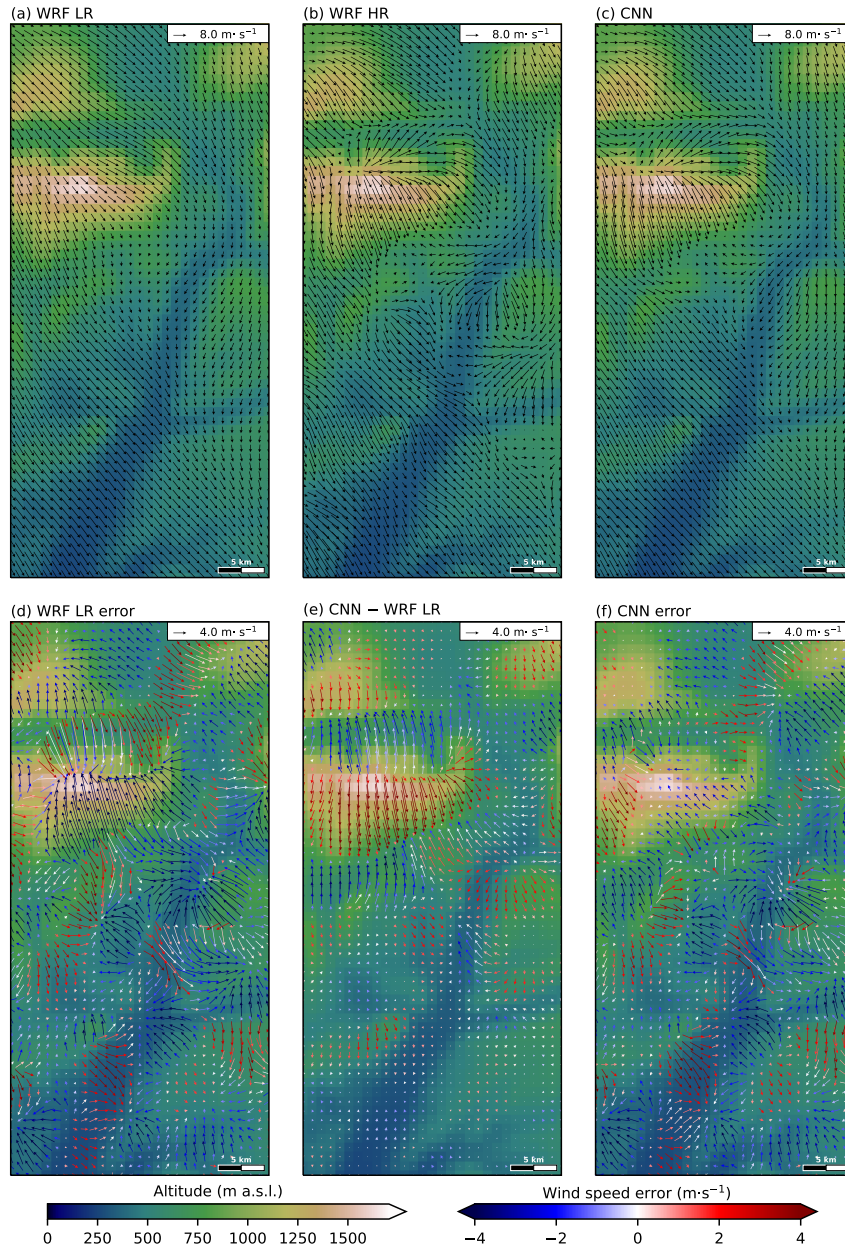
Figure 8. Same as Fig. 7 (only the scales of the arrows differ) for the situation of the 13 January 2021 at 13h UTC (simulation starting at 0h UTC on the 11 January 2021, lead time 61h).

direction and speed errors (Fig. 8d). The correction brought by the CNN is more important over this area (long arrows on Fig. 8e) than over the southern area, allowing to correctly represent the topographical features present in the HR wind field.

To summarize, the CNN learned from the HR WRF dataset the wind-topography interaction features occurring under weak synoptic forcing as well as under strong wind conditions even if, for the latter, the corrections over local and thin topographical elements are moderate. In the following section, we analyze whether these improvements can be generalized to the whole period.

3.3 Wind climatology at specific sites

We begin this wind climatology with the description of results on two sites featuring very different characteristics, a valley site (Fig. 9) and a crest site (Fig. 10). The location of these sites is indicated in Fig. 2a. We picked these two sites as illustration because valleys and crests are the most difficult locations for wind forecasts.

The valley site features two different kinds of winds (Fig. 9e). Firstly, there are winds greater than 6 m·s^{-1} which are mainly oriented northwesterly and southeasterly, corresponding to Mistral events and cloudy/rainy weather, respectively, the directions of which are little dependent on the local topography (important large scale forcing). These winds are well reproduced in the CNN (Fig. 9f), and reasonably well in WRF LR (Fig. 9d), although the northwesterly winds are more dispersed. Moreover, there is a negative bias on speed associated to these winds in WRF LR (Fig. 9b) which is only marginally corrected by the CNN (Fig. 9c). Secondly, there are west-southwesterly and east-northeasterly winds corresponding to up-valley and down-valley winds, respectively, which are highly dependent on the local topography. Both WRF LR and the CNN correctly predict the up-valley winds. However, WRF LR fails to predict the down-valley winds, which are anti-clockwise rotated by approximately 45° due to the south-westerly slope of the LR topography at this place (consistent with explanations of the Fig. 7a), contrary to the CNN which correctly represents them. Therefore, those winds correspond to down-slope winds in both models. Finally, there is an over-representation of winds lower than 3 m·s^{-1} in WRF LR which is only marginally corrected by the CNN (Fig. 9a).

The wind at the crest site features two major orientations, slightly dispersed around the northerly-to-north-easterly and southerly directions (Fig. 10e), mainly resulting from large scale flows forcing. The WRF LR wind rose also presents a bi-modal distribution, but slightly anti-clockwise rotated, and with a higher scatter for the southeasterly winds (Fig. 10d). The comparison of the probability density functions of WRF LR and WRF HR (Fig. 10a) highlights a large disagreement, with an over-estimation (resp. under-estimation) of the occurrence of lighter (resp. stronger) winds in WRF LR, which is generalized to all the directions according to Figs. 10d and 10e. This is consistent with the results depicted in Fig. 8 (under-estimation of the ridge acceleration effect). The CNN corrects both the speed and direction (Figs. 10a, c and f). The probability density functions of the CNN and WRF HR are very close, even for strong speeds (whereas WRF LR is unable to predict any wind speed over 15 m·s^{-1} at this site), and the corresponding wind roses look very similar for all directions.

Based on those results, it seems that some of the conclusions made upon the analysis of Figs. 7 and 8 (better representation of the ridge acceleration and the channeling in valleys) can be generalized to the whole period. Moreover, there is a global improvement of the wind speed climatology over the whole domain (Fig. 11). The probability density functions for the CNN and WRF HR are very close (Fig. 11a) while for WRF LR, winds under 3 m·s^{-1} were too frequent (and therefore winds over 3 m·s^{-1} too rare). The scatter plots (Figs. 11b and c) also demonstrate a better agreement after downscaling with a concentration
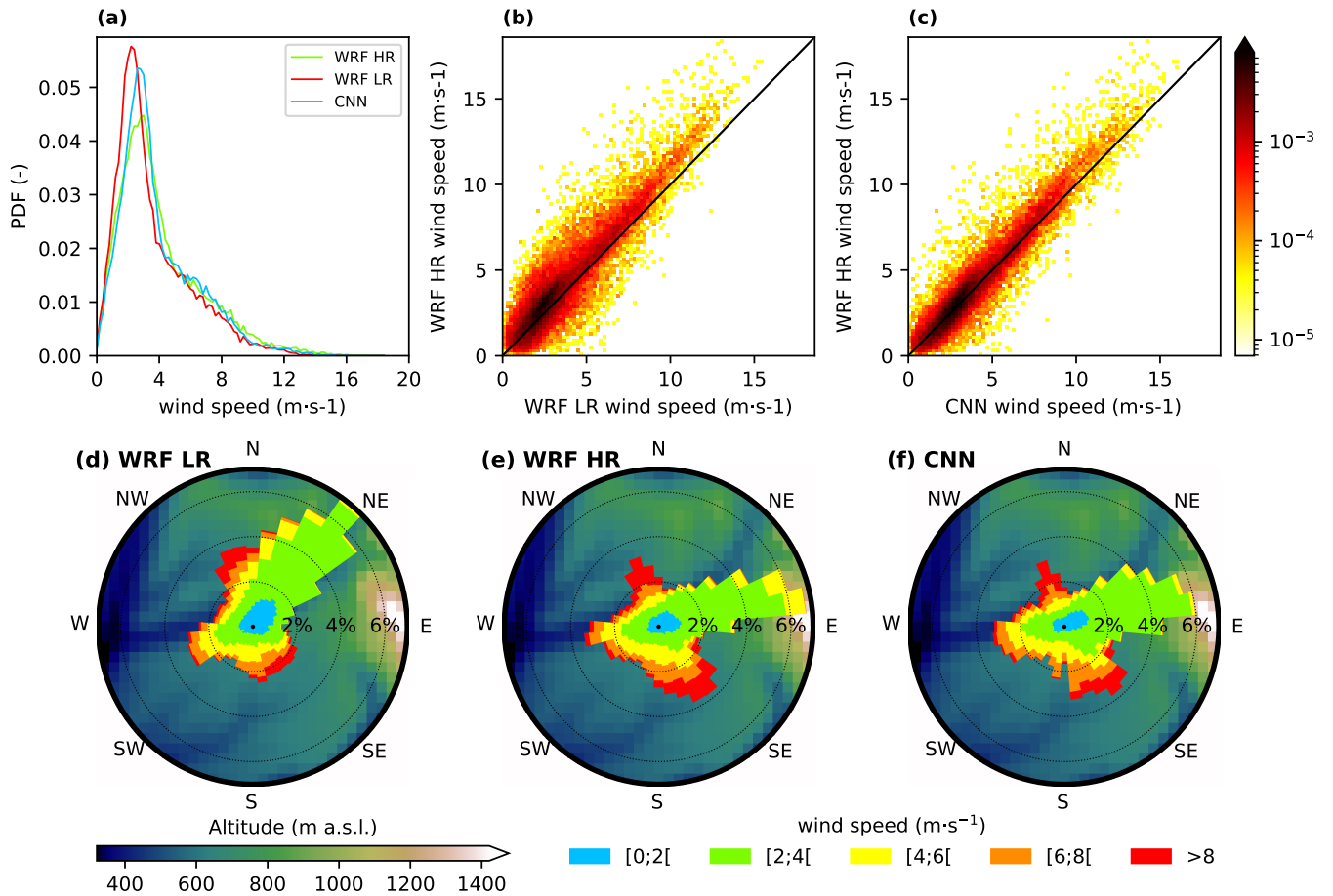
Figure 9. Comparison of wind climatology (calculated on our dataset, that is to say from the 24 December 2020 to the 5 May 2022) between WRF HR, WRF LR and the CNN on a single grid cell in a valley (cf. purple dot on Fig. 2a for the exact location). (a) Comparison of wind speed probability density functions. (b) Density scatter plot comparing wind speeds from the HR and LR forecasts. (c) Same as (b) for the comparison between the HR forecast and the CNN. (d), (e) and (f) Wind roses of the WRF LR, the WRF HR and the CNN, respectively. The colors on the wind roses represent the wind speed, and the background in the disks represents the topography within a radius of 15 km around the valley site.

of data around the $x = y$ line. We will now investigate whether the results illustrated in Figs. 9 and 10 could be generalized to the other areas of the domain.

First of all, the mean speed (over the whole period of simulation) from the HR WRF forecast (Fig. 12f) features some
335   expected patterns related to the topography, such as maxima over the highest topographical elements (ridge acceleration) and minima in valleys (sheltering). The WRF LR mean speed is generally under-estimated over a large part of the domain (Fig. 12d), resulting in a global MBE of -0.55 m·s^{-1} (cf. Fig. 4b), with largest negative biases corresponding to crests. Indeed, the ridge acceleration (cf. the mean wind speed maxima from WRF HR in Fig. 12f over the Mont Ventoux, the Lure mountain,
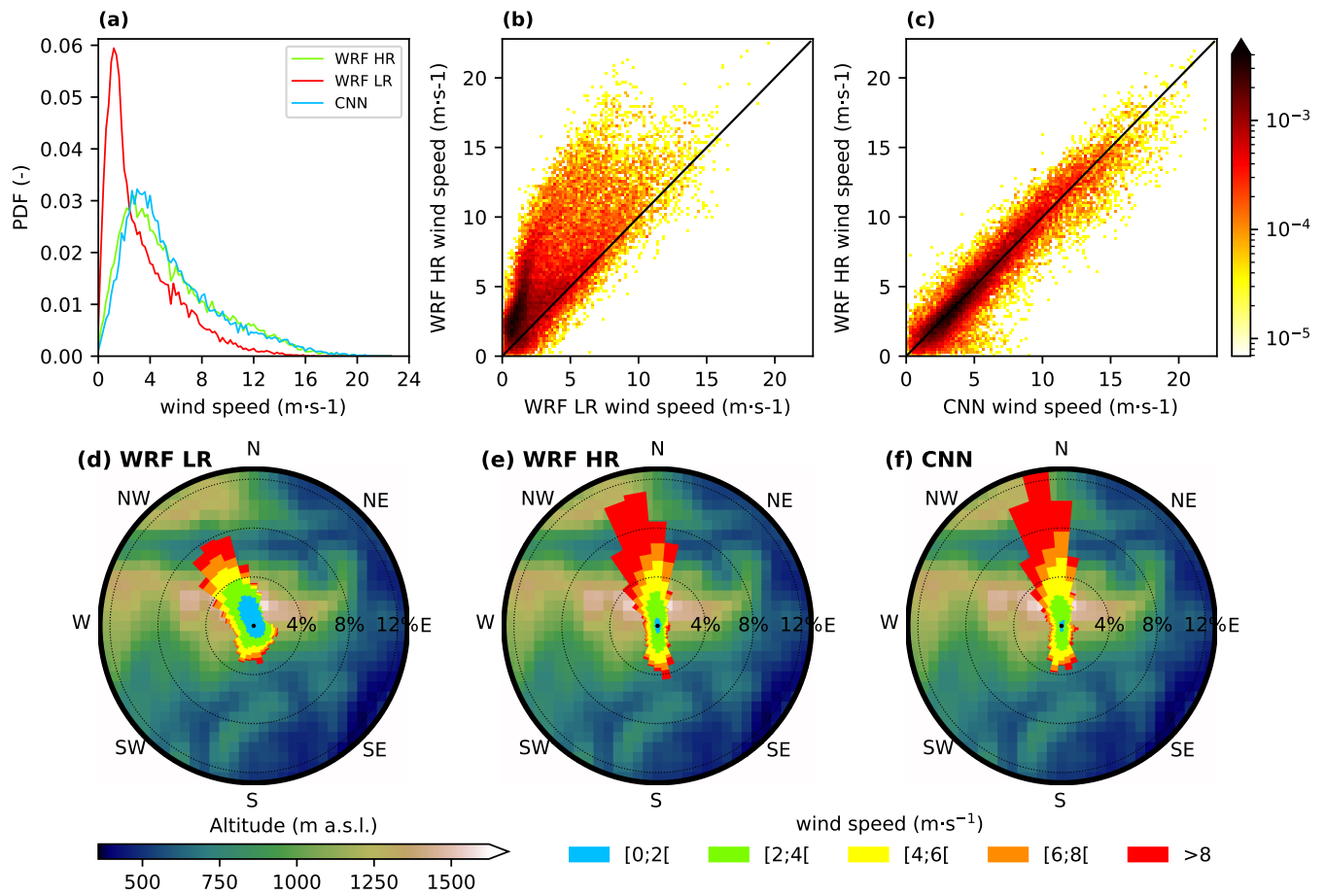
Figure 10. Same as Fig. 9 for a crest location.
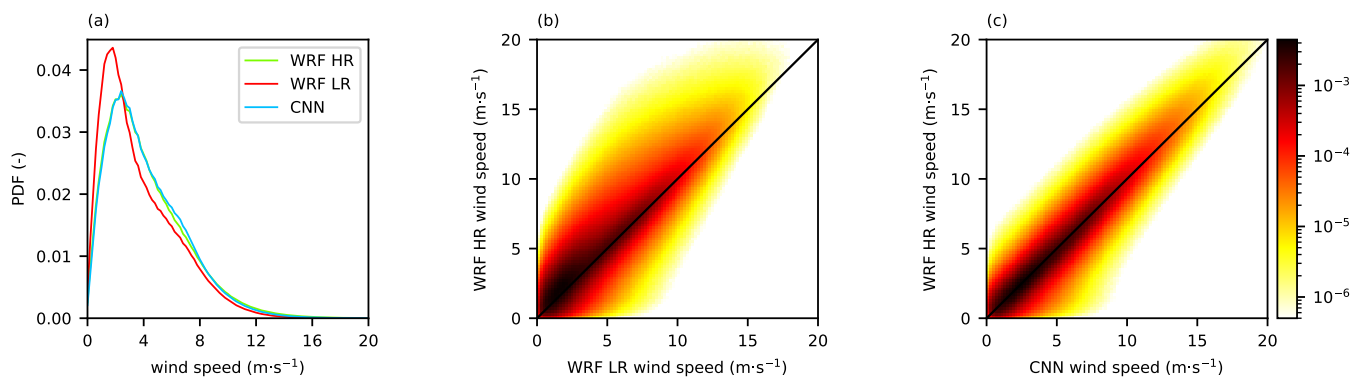
Figure 11. Same as Fig. 9 a, b and c for the whole domain.
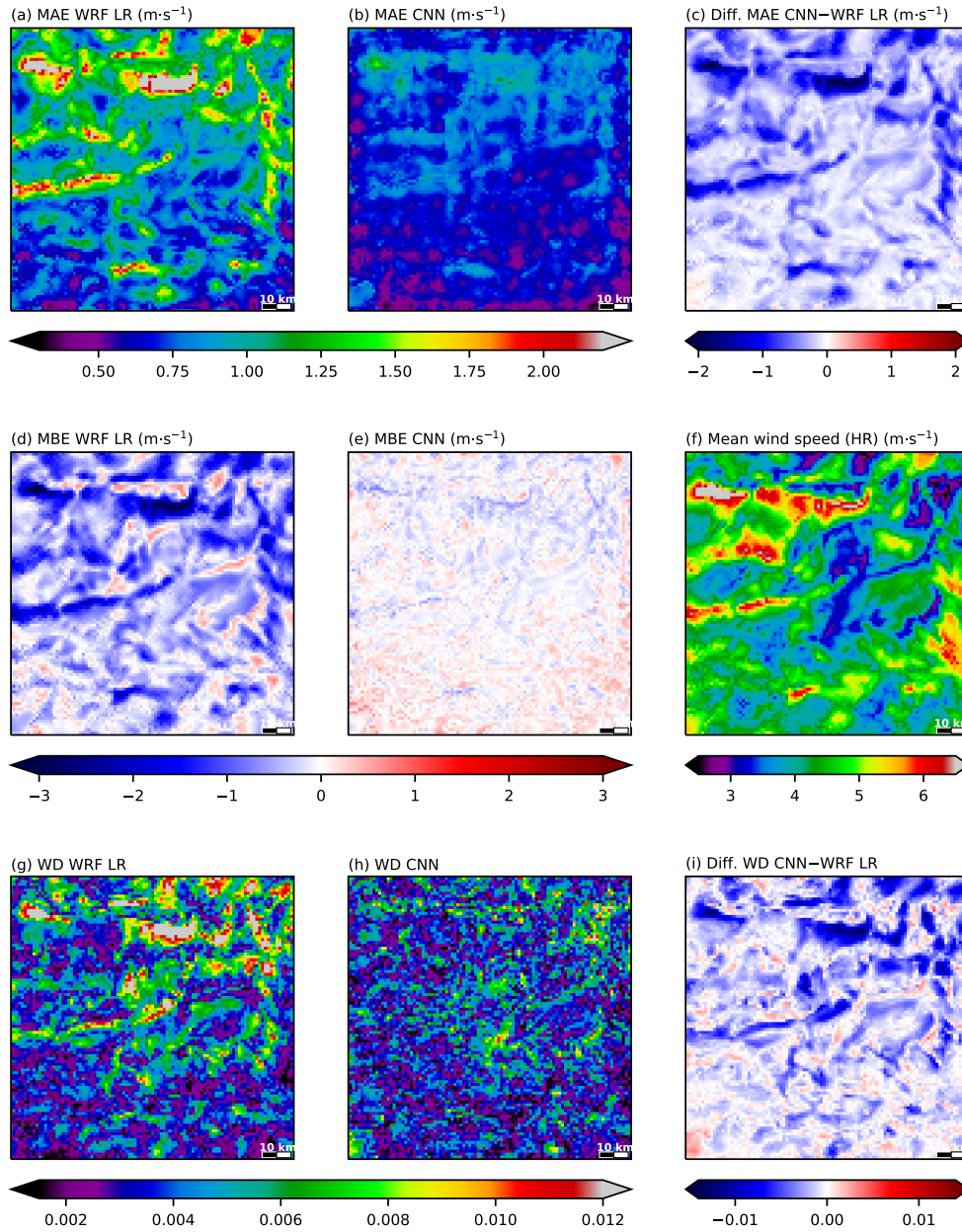
Figure 12. Summary of wind speed metrics averaged over the whole period available (from the 24 December 2020 to the 5 May 2022). Mean absolute error (MAE, a and b), mean bias error (MBE, d and e) and Wasserstein distance (WD, g and h) for the WRF LR forecast and the CNN, respectively. Panels (c) and (i) show the modification brought by the CNN with respect to WRF LR (negative values for improvements) on the MAE and WD, respectively. Panel (f) shows the mean wind speed calculated from the HR forecast.
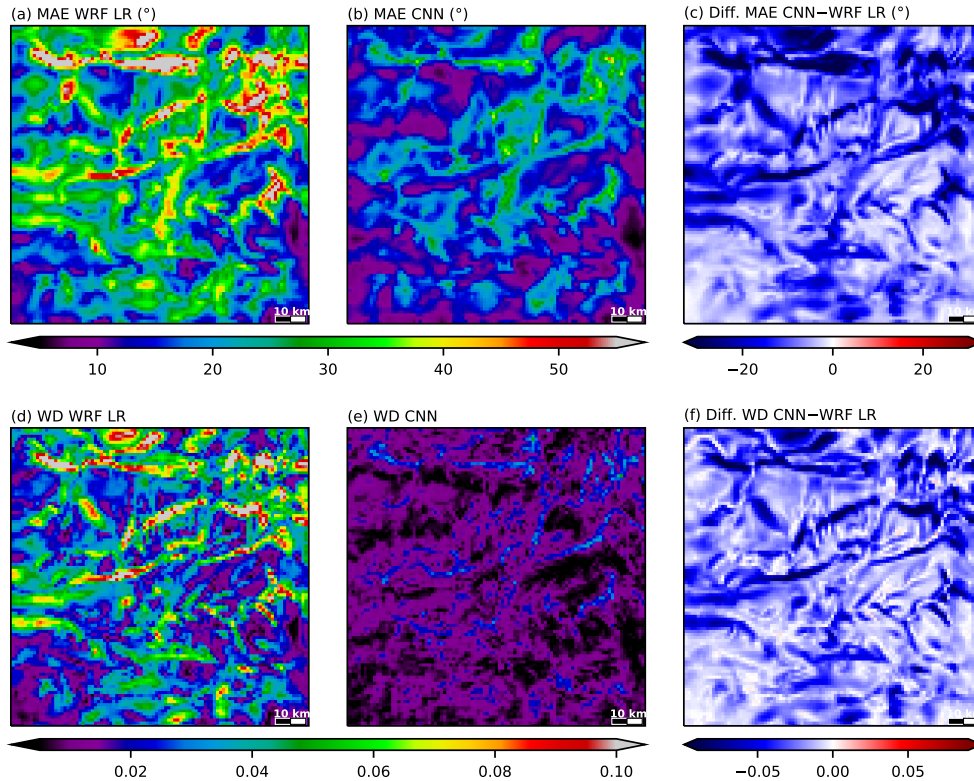
Figure 13. Same as Fig. 12 for wind direction metrics and restricted to the MAE (a, b and c) and the WD (d, e and f).

the Luberon mountain, ...) is under-estimated in WRF LR, resulting to large negative bias values (Fig. 12d). This is consistent
340 with the results over the crest site depicted in Fig. 10. The CNN is able to reproduce the features of the mean wind speed since
the MBE is low over most of the domain (Fig. 12e), resulting in a global MBE close to zero (cf. Fig. 4b).

In WRF LR, largest MAE values are related to largest topographic features: high mountains for the speed, where the ridge
acceleration is the most important (Fig. 12a), valleys for the direction, where the channeling cannot be represented without a
fine description of the topography (Fig. 13a). The CNN either reduces or at least does not degrade the MAE over the main
345 part of the domain (the only exception being on the southwestern corner which corresponds to a pond area) for both the speed
and direction, with larger improvements (in dark blue on Figs. 12c and 13c) corresponding to regions originally featuring the
largest errors in WRF LR.

The WD results indicate that in WRF LR the wind climatology is the worst either over the crests for the speed (Fig. 12g),
resulting from the large under-estimation of ridge acceleration, or in the valleys for the direction (Fig. 13g), resulting from a
350 lack of channeling, which is consistent with the MAE results. The improvement in wind direction brought about by the CNN
is translated in a very similar appearance on the MAE (Fig. 13c) or WD (Fig. 13f) field. For the wind speed, there is no similar
consensus between the two metrics: the overall structure of the improvement field resembles each other for the MAE (Fig. 12c)

and WD (Fig. 12i), but there are local differences, with some spots even reflecting a degradation of the performance evaluated by the WD, as revealed by a few red cells in Fig. 12i. Note that the corresponding MAEs (Fig. 12c) are not degraded at these places. Therefore, from a climatological point of view, WRF LR has mostly a direction issue in valleys, and mostly a speed issue over crests, which is consistent with the results of Figs. 9 and 10, and these shortcomings are well corrected by the CNN.

3.4 Diurnal cycle

In this section, we examine how the different metrics evolve according to the time elapsed since the launch of the daily simulations. The results, shown in Fig. 14, represent the average of all the simulations used. Concerning WRF LR, the MAE exhibits a clear diurnal cycle for both the speed (Fig. 14a) and the direction (Fig. 14c), with higher values during the night. This can be explained by the fact that under stable nocturnal conditions, flows are highly dependent on the local topography, resulting in a high spatial heterogeneity (green lines on Figs. 14b and 14d for the speed and direction, respectively). After downscaling, the MAE is reduced for all times and its diurnal cycle remains, although its magnitude is reduced due to a greater improvement during the nighttime when the higher errors were encountered. The nocturnal evolution of the MAE generally exhibits two maxima, at the evening and morning transitions (even if this effect is smoothed on the graphic due to seasonal effect), except for the MAE on the direction in WRF LR which slightly increases towards its maxima reached at the morning transition. Morning and evening transitions are known to be highly difficult periods to forecast, especially for wind parameters which can experience a high temporal variability, which could explain these error maxima.

Note that the lower spatial heterogeneity values encountered in WRF LR in comparison with WRF HR, which is consistent with the results presented on Figs. 7 and 8, were expected since the local topography is not resolved in this simulation. The CNN increases the spatial heterogeneity in comparison with WRF LR (also consistent with Figs. 7 and 8), but not enough to reach the values of the HR forecast, demonstrating that the downscaled forecast is still too smooth. A way to improve this issue would be to use a GAN, which is a specific kind of CNN designed to produce very realistic fields (see for example Miralles et al. (2022)).

4 Conclusions

CNNs are becoming the most popular deep learning tool and their specialization for extracting spatial information is well suited for use in atmospheric sciences. Recent studies demonstrated their ability to downscale wind forecasts. In this study, we aimed to move forward in this question by exploring different strategies for downscaling low-level wind forecast using CNNs, especially regarding the output variables and their associated loss function.

The downscaling was applied on WRF wind forecasts over south-eastern France (including the south-western part of the Alps) from its original 9-km resolution onto a 1-km resolution grid. The 1-km resolution data used for training consists of a series of WRF simulations over a 99 km $\times$ 99 km domain, launched for each day of a 16-month period.

Among the approaches tested (i.e. computing the wind components, the normalized components or the wind direction, using the MSE loss function in its classical version or with specific adaptations), there is no one that outperforms the others for
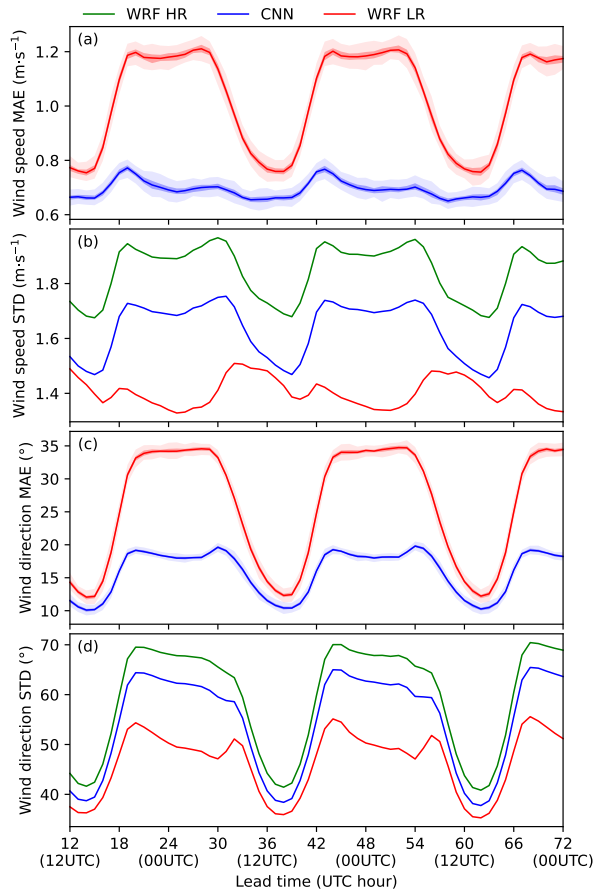
Figure 14. Evolution of the MAE for the speed (a) and direction (c) for lead times from 12 to 72 hours of the WRF LR forecast (in red) and the CNN (in blue). On these panels, the solid line represents the median value, the dark area is the 25 to 75 quantile interval and the light areas are the whiskers, according to the boxplot construction based on the bootstrap distribution, as explained in section 2.4. Panels (b) and (d) represent the time evolution of the heterogeneity (cf. section 2.4) for the speed and the direction, respectively.

both the direction and the speed at the same time. Nevertheless, combining two different CNNs, dedicated to the direction or speed forecast respectively, yields the better overall performance. The best direction forecast is derived from the normalized components, which we found to be more accurate when the loss function is customized by adding a penalty term designed to produce a more physically consistent couple of components. The best speed forecast is derived from the wind components, using a modified MSE loss function designed to remove the speed bias, even if the performance on the individual components is degraded.

In comparison with the initial 9-km resolution forecast, the CNN reduced the wind speed bias from -0.55 m·s^{-1} to -0.01 m·s^{-1}, the wind speed MAE from 1.02 m·s^{-1} to 0.69 m·s^{-1}, and the wind direction MAE from 25.9^o to 15.5^o. Moreover, some typical topographical features, poorly represented in the LR forecast, are well reproduced in the downscaled wind fields,

both for speed (ridge acceleration, leeward deceleration, sheltering in valleys) and direction (deflection, valley channeling). Regarding the diurnal cycle, there is a general improvement in the forecast, especially during the nighttime, stable stratification period, which is the most difficult to simulate. Finally, the downscaling creates a spatial heterogeneity in the wind fields, but not as the same level as in the HR forecast. In the future, this issue could be solved by using generative networks, which are specifically designed to produce realistic fields, but with the risk of impacting the overall performance.

We will extend this study by evaluating the performance of the method presented in this paper when applying over areas other than those where the CNNs have been trained. The first tests already performed have shown an improvement over the initial low-resolution wind fields, although this improvement is much less than that obtained over the area of the present study.

Author contributions. FD developed and implemented the CNNs-based models, performed the analyses and wrote the initial version of the manuscript. PD and TH contributed to the analyses and the writing. TH performed the WRF simulations.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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