Real-time profiling of organic trace gases in the planetary boundary layer by PTR-MS using a tethered balloon

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A method for real time profiling of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) was developed combining the advantages of a tethered balloon as a research platform and of proton transfer reaction mass spectrometry (PTR-MS) as an analytical technique for fast and highly sensitive VOC measurements. A 200 m Teflon tube was used to draw sampling air from a tethered aerodynamic balloon to the PTR-MS instrument. Positive and negative artefacts (i.e. formation or loss of VOCs in the tube) were characterised in the laboratory and in the field with a set of 11 atmospherically relevant VOCs including pure hydrocarbons and oxygenated hydrocarbons. The only two compounds that showed a measurable change when sampled through the 200 m long tube were acetone (7% increase) and xylene (6% loss). The method was successfully deployed during a winter field campaign to determine the small scale spatial and temporal patterns of air pollutants under winter inversion conditions. Real-time profiling of organic trace gases in the planetary boundary layer by PTR-MS using a tethered balloon has great potential to bridge the gap between ground based and aircraft measurements which, for safety reasons, cannot be conducted in the lowermost 150 m above ground.