Enhancing the comprehension of mixed layer depth control on the Mediterranean phytoplankton phenology

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[1] Phytoplankton phenology is primarily affected by physical forcing. However, its quantification is far from being completely understood. Among the physical forcing factors, the mixed layer depth (MLD) is considered to have the strongest impact on phytoplankton dynamics, and consequently, on their phenology. The role of MLD variations in shaping the phytoplankton phenology was explored in the Mediterranean Sea, a basin displaying contrasting phenological regimes. A database of MLD estimations was merged with ocean color chlorophyll concentrations ([Chl]SAT) to generate concomitant annual MLD and [Chl]SAT cycles. Several indices were calculated to quantitatively analyze these cycles. The relevance of indices summarizing the temporal difference between main characteristics of MLD and [Chl]SAT cycles was emphasized. As previously observed, two dominant phenological regimes coexist in the Mediterranean Sea. The first is marked by a typical spring bloom, as in temperate regions. The second displays a low seasonality and an absence of an intense [Chl]SAT peak as in subtropical areas. The MLD is shown to play a key role in determining the dominant phenological regime in a given area. Results also show that regions having low seasonality display concomitant MLD and [Chl]SAT maxima, whereas [Chl]SAT peaks are generally observed 30 days after MLD peaks in regions with strongest seasonality. Over the whole basin, [Chl]SAT increase starts 1 month after the initiation of MLD deepening. Finally, after examining the impact of MLD on light and nutrient availability for phytoplankton, mechanisms were proposed to explain the time lags between MLD and [Chl]SAT increase and MLD and [Chl]SAT maxima.


1. Introduction

[2] Characterizing the oceanic phytoplankton phenology is a critical step to identify major alterations in the functioning of oceanic ecosystems and to further connect these alterations to global or local environmental changes. As indicated in a recent review [Ji et al., 2010], the description of the oceanic phytoplankton phenology implies the identification (in terms of date, duration, and magnitude) of the main steps in the temporal evolution of key parameters of an ocean ecosystem (i.e., chlorophyll-a, phytoplankton species compositions, zooplankton abundances, etc.). Linking these key episodes to environmental conditions could strongly improve our capability to identify future trends in marine ecosystem dynamics.

[3] However, until recently, the lack of data hinders a broad and global analysis of phytoplankton ocean phenology, except on some areas (i.e., Hawaii Ocean Time series (HOT) and Bermuda Atlantic Time Series (BATS)) where data are available. Satellite ocean color remote sensing, generating global and repeated observations of the ocean surface chlorophyll concentration (a proxy for phytoplankton biomass) induced a fresh impetus in the study of phytoplankton phenology. Indeed, despite the limits of the ocean color data (i.e., cloud coverage, surface observation, algorithmic issues, variation in carbon to chlorophyll ratio) numerous analyses used satellite observations of surface
chlorophyll to provide a comprehensive description of phytoplankton phenology at global or regional scales [Platt et al., 2009; Demarcq et al., 2012; D’Ortenzio et al., 2012; Racault et al., 2012].

[4] Phytoplankton open ocean phenomenology is driven by a complex combination of biotic and abiotic forcings. Biotic forcings, which include the zooplankton controls of the phytoplankton accumulation, as well as the species interplay and successions, are the most difficult to assess, because in situ observations are often insufficient [Ji et al., 2010]. Concerning abiotic factors, the mixed layer depth (MLD), which indicates on the depth reached by turbulent mixing in a recent (order of days) past [Brainard and Gregg, 1995], governs both nutrient and light availability for phytoplankton [Mann and Lazier, 2006], and it is historically considered the main physical factor in influencing phytoplankton dynamics.

[5] The chlorophyll response to MLD variations has been then intensively studied in the past, for the most using satellite data [Jyoder et al., 1993; Obata et al., 1996; Wilson and Coles, 2005; Longhurst, 2006]. The general picture indicates a separation between temperate and polar areas, characterized by a strong seasonality in MLD variations and spectacular chlorophyll increase in spring [Obata et al., 1996; Wilson and Coles, 2005], and tropical and subtropical regions, where MLD and chlorophyll seasonal cycles are less variable and covary together, an increase in chlorophyll concentration corresponding to a deepening of the MLD [Menzel and Ryther, 1959; Henson et al., 2009]. Specific studies, focused on the North Atlantic, analyzed correlations between initiation of phytoplankton accumulation and mixed layer shallowing [Siegel et al., 2002; Boss and Behrenfeld, 2010; Behrenfeld, 2010; Martinez et al., 2011], or studied interannual or regional variability in MLD, meteorological forcing, and chlorophyll response [Dutkiewicz et al., 2001; Beaugrand, 2004; Henson et al., 2006]. Similarly, oligotrophic tropical and subtropical gyres were specifically studied [McClain et al., 2004; Behrenfeld et al., 2006; Polovina et al., 2008] by cross comparing model outputs and in situ data with ocean color observations.

[6] Mediterranean Sea, which extends from 30°N to 45°N, is positioned in the transition zone between temperate and subtropical environments. The basin is characterized by low chlorophyll values (particularly in its eastern part), with the exception of some zones, in both western and eastern regions, marked by a rapid increase of chlorophyll: the Ligurian Sea, the Southern Adriatic Sea, and the Rhodes gyre area [Bosc et al., 2004; Ignatiades et al., 2009]. Recently, satellite observations [D’Ortenzio and Ribera d’Alcalá, 2009, hereinafter referred to as DR09] confirmed this feature and showed a coexistence within the basin of different patterns in the seasonal cycle of surface chlorophyll concentration (associated by the authors to phenological trophic regimes). The subtropical-like regime (characterized by low seasonality) dominates almost the entire Mediterranean Sea, which displays only some spots of the temperate-like regime (characterized by a strong peak of chlorophyll during spring). Mediterranean blooming areas are characterized by strong winter mixing, inducing deep MLD and an intense refueling of nutrients in the surface layers [Gacic et al., 2002; Marty et al., 2002]. The widespread oligotrophy, on the other hand, is generally explained by relatively narrow MLDS (consequence of a weak mixing in winter and of the strong heating in summer), which would prevent a sufficient refueling of nutrients to surface layers [Napolitano et al., 2000].

[7] Although specific analyses have been conducted at the regional scale (in particular in the Ligurian Sea, where the largest Mediterranean blooms occur [Levy et al., 1998; Chifflet et al., 2001; Marty et al., 2002; Lacroix and Grégoire, 2002], very few studies explored the link between the phytoplankton phenomenology and MLD annual variations at the basin scale [Crispi et al., 2002; Lazzari et al., 2012; Volpe et al., 2012]. Nevertheless, because of the coexistence of subtropical and temperate phenomenological regimes in a limited space and of a relatively large spectrum of MLD conditions (spanning from very shallow layers in summer to the totally homogenized water columns in the sites of deep water formation), the Mediterranean basin represents a very good system to explore and better understand the role played by MLD dynamics in controlling phytoplankton phenomenology.

[8] The available observations were analyzed to explore the link between the annual cycles of surface chlorophyll concentration and MLD, by comparing the dates and magnitudes of their key events. In situ data were used to estimate the MLD and satellite surface chlorophyll-a concentrations ([Chl]SAT hereinafter) to derive phytoplankton phenomenology. The available MLD and [Chl]SAT data were organized in a unique database and then analyzed on the basis of the Mediterranean Sea bioregionalization provided by DR09.

[9] Three analyses are presented in this paper. For each of them, annual concomitant MLD and [Chl]SAT time series have been computed for each DR09 bioregion, although the data used and the averaging methods vary. In the first analysis (referred to as “Climatological”), all the data available for each bioregion were used, providing a preliminary picture of the MLD and [Chl]SAT seasonal variations. The second analysis (referred to as “Interannual”) was focused on the interannual variability, and each year was processed separately, selecting only the MLD and [Chl]SAT time series having no temporal gaps. In the third analysis (referred to as “Argo float”), the MLD and [Chl]SAT time series was analyzed along the track of available Argo floats to verify to which extent the impact of the spatiotemporal averaging processes might affect the reconstruction.

[10] A set of indices was introduced to quantitatively assess the link between MLD and [Chl]SAT time series and the trends among those indices have been examined and discussed. Finally, a quantitative parameterization was developed to assess the relative role of light and nutrients in determining [Chl]SAT variations in the Mediterranean areas and to partially explain the differences observed in the trophic regimes. For this, a data set of Mediterranean nitrate profiles was assembled and used for statistical analysis on the relative position of MLD observations compared with the nitrone depths and the critical depths [Sverdrup, 1953].

2. Data and Methods
2.1. Mixed Layer Depth

[11] The database that was used to evaluate MLD was composed of temperature and salinity profiles initially
gathered to evaluate the climatological MLD in the basin (covering the 1972–2004 period [D’Ortenzio et al., 2005; D’Ortenzio and Prieur, 2010]) and merged to profiles collected during the 2004–2010 period (http://www.coriolis.eu.org/). The spatial distribution of the 72,186 available profiles is homogenous over the whole basin, although some areas are less well covered (i.e., South Tyrrhenian, North Ionian, and South Ionian from the Sicily strait to the Gulf of Sidra). After a quality control procedure for removing outliers (0.5% of profiles), potential density was calculated [Fofonoff and Millard, 1983], and profiles were linearly interpolated at 1 m depth interval. The MLD was calculated at the depth where the density difference from the surface reference (fixed at 10 m) is 0.03 kg m$^{-3}$ [de Boyer Montegut et al., 2004; D’Ortenzio et al., 2005]. If no observation was available at 10 m, the shallowest measurement was used as the surface reference if it was above 20 m (12% of cases), otherwise MLD was not computed (5% of cases). When a density difference of 0.03 kg m$^{-3}$ was not obtained throughout the profile, MLD was assumed to be the deepest measured depth (3.4% of profiles).

2.2. Surface Satellite Chlorophyll-a Concentration

[12] The 8-day Level 3 standard mapped images of SeaWiFS and MODIS Aqua surface chlorophyll at 9 km resolution were obtained from the NASA web site (http://oceancolor.gsfc.nasa.gov/) for the 1998–2010 period. SeaWiFS data were used preferentially to cover longer periods. However, some gaps in the SeaWiFS database exist after 2008, during which MODIS Aqua maps were used instead. In the Mediterranean Sea, a bias on [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$ observations obtained from the NASA standard algorithm [O’Reilly et al., 2000] was identified [Claustre et al., 2002; D’Ortenzio et al., 2002; Bosc et al., 2004; Volpe et al., 2007]. This bias, although relatively high, decreases with increasing chlorophyll concentrations. Volpe et al. [2007] indicate a bias of 92% on average, reduced to 29% for chlorophyll concentration larger than 0.4 mg m$^{-3}$. However, the NASA standard [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$ product was preferred to existing regional algorithms, because focus was given to the relative changes in [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$ (see further) rather than to the absolute values. Moreover, the NASA standard [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$ product allows for a better consistency between SeaWiFS and MODIS data sets [Franz et al., 2005], which could be relevant to avoid the introduction of any bias in the time series.

2.3. Nitrate Concentration

[13] The 5318 nitrate concentration profiles were assembled for the Mediterranean area over the 1961–2010 period. Although phosphate is generally the limiting nutrient in the Mediterranean Sea [Ribera d’Alcàla et al., 2003; Pujo-Pay et al., 2011], the number of phosphate concentration profiles available was insufficient to determine robust statistical relationships. Nitrate concentration profiles were then considered more appropriate to evaluate the nutrient availability. Data were obtained from the MEDATLAS [Maillard et al., 2005], MATER [Maillard et al., 2002], and SESAME (http://www.sesame-ip.eu) programs, as well as from specific cruises. A quality control procedure was applied to nitrate profiles to identify and remove outliers and spikes (16% of data points). The profiles with less than five valid data points were removed from the data set (28% of profiles). We calculated the first depth of the isocline 1 $\mu$m as a proxy of the nitracline depth (D$_{\text{nl}}$), similar to Cermeno et al. [2008]. We assumed that the nitracline separates upper nitrate-depleted waters from lower repleted waters, and, consequently, it is the first depth where nitrates are detected. In spite of the high number of D$_{\text{nl}}$ estimations (2693 values with a resolution superior or equal to $\pm$25 m), large areas of the basin were undersampled, particularly during winter (i.e., Tyrrhenian Sea and North Adriatic).

2.4. Bioregionalization

[14] The bioregionalization proposed by DR09 was based on a phenological criterion (i.e., the shape of the seasonal cycle of satellite-derived [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$). It was calculated using a k-mean cluster analysis over a 10 year SeaWiFS [Chl]$_{\text{SAT}}$ database, allowing the identification of seven dominant phenological cycles, grouped, in turn, into three more general open ocean regimes (referred to in DR09 as “Bloom”, “No Bloom,” and “Intermittent”). Note that for DR09 a “bloom” corresponds to a rapid accumulation of phytoplankton biomass, as it generally occurs at spring in the North Atlantic.

[15] Here, the DR09 bioregions were modified (Figure 1) as follows: (1) a $5 \times 5$ pixel median filter was applied to eliminate the patchiness of the DR09 and to establish well-defined continuous boundaries between two bioregions; (2) coastal bioregions of DR09, as well as zones for which the number of MLD observations was insufficient to reconstruct a seasonal cycle at 8 day resolution (i.e., Adriatic, Tyrrhenian, Aegean, Alboran, and North Ionian Seas), were excluded from the analysis; (3) bioregions originally named “Intermittent”, “No Bloom 1,” and “No Bloom 2” were separated into several, smaller, areas, to better account for regional specificities and to create areas without discontinuities (Figure 1).

[16] Hereafter, each bioregion is referred to by the name of the original DR09 bioregion, in which the name of the
Table 1. Description of Indices Computed From MLD and [Chl]SAT Time Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLD-Max</td>
<td>Annual maximum of MLD</td>
<td>meter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLD-DateInit</td>
<td>Date of the initiation of the MLD increase (first time that MLD is deeper than annual median plus 5%)</td>
<td>days since the 177th day of the year (late June)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLD-DateMax</td>
<td>Date of the annual MLD maximum</td>
<td>days since the 177th day of the year (late June)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-Max</td>
<td>Annual maximum of [Chl]SAT</td>
<td>mg m⁻³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-DateInit</td>
<td>Date of the initiation of the [Chl]SAT increase (first time that [Chl]SAT exceeds the annual median plus 5%)</td>
<td>days since the 177th day of the year (late June)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-DateMax</td>
<td>Date of the annual [Chl]SAT maximum</td>
<td>days since the 177th day of the year (late June)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeltaInit</td>
<td>CHL-DateInit minus MLD-DateInit</td>
<td>days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeltaMax</td>
<td>CHL-DateMax minus MLD-DateMax</td>
<td>dimensionless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corr</td>
<td>Spearman rank coefficient correlation between annual MLD and [Chl]SAT time series</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.5. [Chl]SAT and MLD Time Series

Considering the new spatial bioregionalization, a multiscale approach was carried out and three different spatiotemporal scales were analyzed separately. In the “Climatological” analysis, for each bioregion, a spatial average of all the MLD and [Chl]SAT observations available was carried out. The resulting time series were binned at an 8 day temporal resolution. The MLD and [Chl]SAT databases do not rigorously cover the same period (i.e., 1972–2012 for MLD and 1998–2010 for [Chl]SAT), although they provide a general view of the first-order annual variations of the two parameters.

In the “Interannual” analysis, we processed each year separately. For each bioregion, an interannual time series for MLD and [Chl]SAT was generated by averaging the available data over an 8 day temporal resolution. The decadal time series were separated into annual units centered on winter months (i.e., ranging from the 177th day of year \( n \), to the 176th day of year \( n + 1 \)). We retained only the years comprising more than 38 (out of 46) MLD and [Chl]SAT pairs.

In the “Argo float” analysis, we extracted from the MLD data set all the observations obtained from Argo floats. For each Argo profile, the satellite image that matched the date of the profile was selected and the corresponding [Chl]SAT over a 0.3° x 0.3° box centered on the geographical position of the profile was extracted and averaged. Data from 99 different floats were used. Using the same procedure as for the “Interannual” analysis, the Argo [Chl]SAT and MLD time series lasting several years were split into annual [Chl]SAT and MLD series. Only complete or near-complete (starting in August or ending in May) series were retained generating 77 annual time series. To compare the “Argo float” analysis to “Climatological” and “Interannual” analyses, we assigned a bioregion to each time series on the basis of its geographical position at the time of the [Chl]SAT maximum. Sixty time series were assigned to one of the nine bioregions identified on Figure 1. The 17 remaining time series were not analyzed.

2.6. Indices for Characterizing [Chl]SAT and MLD Time Series

The phenological and MLD indices calculated on [Chl]SAT and MLD time series are summarized in Table 1. The annual MLD and [Chl]SAT maxima (“Max” in Tables 2–4) were computed on each time series, as well as the date of annual maxima (“DateMax”) and the date of the beginning of the MLD and [Chl]SAT increase (“DateInit”). After Siegel et al. [2002], DateInit was calculated as the first day of the year (starting in July), when [Chl]SAT (or MLD) exceeds the annual median plus 5%. The Spearman rank correlation (“Corr” in Tables 2–4) was computed over annual time series between MLD and [Chl]SAT. DeltaMax (DeltaInit) indicates the time difference in days between the MLD and [Chl]SAT DateMax (DateInit). A positive DeltaMax (DeltaInit) index means that MLD-DateMax (MLD-DateInit) appears clearly, and by a geographical indication.

Table 2. Indices for the “Climatological” Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bioregion</th>
<th>MLD</th>
<th>[Chl]SAT</th>
<th>MLD/[Chl]SAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLD-Max</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLD-DateInit</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLD-DateMax</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-Max</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-DateInit</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHL-DateMax</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeltaInit</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeltaMax</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corr</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
null
CHL-DateInit (Table 2), which is observed around day 180 for the “Bloom” regime, day 164 for the “Intermittent” and day 152 for the “No Bloom.”

The $[\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}}$ and MLD time series are generally strongly correlated (Corr in Table 2). Only the “Bloom” regime shows a value of about 0.5, which is likely caused by the time lag between MLD-Max and CHL-Max. For the “Bloom” regime, DeltaMax value is 48 days, whereas for the “Intermittent” it is 24 days and for the “No Bloom” regime it is around zero (with the notable exception of the “No Bloom 2 Ionian” bioregion). The DeltaInit values (Table 2) are, conversely, much more similar in the various bioregions (i.e., around 30 days), with, again, an exception for the “Bloom” regime (i.e., 48 days).

3.2. “Interannual” Analysis

In the “Interannual” analysis, we mainly focused on the interannual patterns and on their deviation from the climatology. The indices, calculated for each year, are reported in the supporting information (Table S1) and the average of the single annual estimations is in Table 3. Figure 3 shows the available seasonal cycles for both $[\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}}$ and MLD, for each bioregions.

For the “Bloom North-West” bioregion, the values of DateMax and Max for both the MLD and $[\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}}$ parameters show high interannual variability (Table S1). The var index on Table S1 indicates the percentage difference between the individual estimations of MLD-Max (or CHL-Max) and the interannual average of MLD-Max (or CHL-Max) reported on Table 3. Averaging all the var estimations, it appears that MLD-Max shows a 55% deviation from the interannual mean, while CHL-Max shows a 16% deviation. The CHL-Max values are generally high (close...
to $1.50 \text{ mg m}^{-3}$ for most of the years) and less variable than MLD-Max, which ranges between 119 and 523 m. In this bioregion, MLD-DateMax and CHL-DateMax range between days 212 and 276 and between days 260 and 308, respectively (Table S1). The MLD-DateInit and CHL-DateInit are less variable: the first always occurring in early November, the second observed from day 140 (late November) to 172 (early December). DeltaInit is

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**Figure 3.** Interannual variations of MLD (red line) and [Chl]_{\text{SAT}} (blue line). Annual periods were considered from July to June (dotted vertical lines). Note that the MLD scale is not linear.
consequently constant over the years (14 days on average, Table 3). Excluding the 2006/2007 time series, DeltaMax in this bioregion is always positive (greater than 16 days). As it is qualitatively evident from Figure 3a, the 2006/2007 cycle strongly diverges from the others. During this year, the lowest MLD-Max and CHL-Max were obtained and DeltaMax was negative (i.e., -16 days, Table S1). Bernardello et al. [2012] observed a similar pattern for phytoplankton biomass dynamics during winter 2007 and ascribed it to specific meteorological factors characterized by an abnormally low wind stress and by heat fluxes that were only slightly negative compared to other winters over the 2002–2010 period.

For the “Intermittent” regimes, the lack of MLD data allows to describe only four annual cycles, for three different bioregions (Figure 3b and Table S1). The MLD-Max and CHL-Max present important interannual variability (“Intermittent North-West” bioregion) as well as within bioregions. Conversely, the temporal indices (with the exception of MLD-DateInit) are weakly variable interannually (Table S1). In particular, DeltaMax is very stable (on average 32 days, Table 3) and seems to be constant for the three different “Intermittent” bioregions.

For the “No Bloom” bioregions, 30 annual cycles were obtained (Figures 3c–3g and Table 3). The MLD-Max and CHL-Max values exhibit interannual variability, ranging between day 148 (November) and 168 (March) and between day 172 (December) and 284 (April), respectively. In consequence, DeltaMax also displays important variability with values spanning between -104 and +88 days (Table S1). Considering the shape of the seasonal MLD and [Chl]_SAT evolution, the strong variability of the DateMax index is, however, not surprising. Indeed, both MLD and [Chl]_SAT cycles rarely exhibit a clear peak, most of the cycles displaying only a winter plateau (Figure 3). However, when interannual estimations are averaged for “No Bloom” bioregions (Table 3), DeltaMax shows more stable values, generally close to zero. Phasing between MLD and [Chl]_SAT cycles is confirmed more quantitatively by the high values of the Corr index (0.76 on average and always superior to 0.61). The values for the DateInit indices present a low variability between years and bioregions, with most of the values observed around days 112 (October) for MLD-DateInit and around day 138 (November) for CHL-DateInit. Delatninit is also fairly stable (the average is +25 days, Table 3). Finally, MLD-Max displays higher interannual variability than CHL-Max. MLD-Max shows 30% average deviation from the interannual mean while it is only 12% for CHL-Max (see var index on Table S1).

Comparing the indices of “Interannual” and “Climatological” analysis (Tables 2 and 3), differences are generally small for temporal indices. Some exceptions are, however, evident. In the “Bloom North-West” bioregion, DeltaInit and DeltaMax of the “Interannual” analysis are reduced to 14 and 31 days, respectively. Values of MLD-Max and CHL-Max indices in the “Interannual” analysis are generally lower than in the “Climatological” analysis. This is true for all the bioregions, though particularly evident in the “Bloom North-West” bioregion. Finally, for “Intermittent” and “No Bloom” bioregions Corr is smaller in the “Interannual” analysis than in the “Climatological” analysis.

To complete the analysis, the combined distribution of CHL-Max and MLD-Max were compared (Figure 4a). Results show that points tend to aggregate by bioregion. A separation between western (squares on Figure 4a) and eastern bioregions (triangles on Figure 4a) is also observed. Western bioregions generally display higher CHL-Max values than the eastern ones.

3.3. “Argo float” Analysis

In the “Argo float” analysis, Argo MLD and [Chl]_SAT specific time series were compared with the climatology to determine the characteristics which are
maintained (or not). A summary of indices computed on each of the 60 available annual “Argo float” time series is reported in Table 4. The scattering of some indices with respect to the “Climatological” analysis is represented on Figure 5. The scatter plot of MLD-Max versus CHL-Max is shown in Figure 4b, for sake of comparison with the similar plot of the “Interannual” analysis (Figure 4a).

When the “Argo float” MLD-Max and CHL-Max are compared (Figure 4b), the resulting patterns are fairly similar to those observed in the “Interannual” analysis (Figure 4a). Nevertheless, some differences appear. Points are more scattered in the “Argo float” analysis than in “Interannual” analysis. The difference between eastern and western bioregions is also obtained in the “Argo float” analysis. However, the distribution of western (squares on Figure 4b) and eastern (triangles on Figure 4b) points present similarities, not evident in the “Interannual” analysis. For both eastern and western bioregions, most of the points characterized by low CHL-Max and low MLD-Max belong to the “No Bloom” or “Intermittent” bioregions. Points marked by high MLD-Max and high CHL-Max belong to the “Bloom North-West” and “Intermittent North-West” bioregions (western basin) or to “Intermittent Rhodes” bioregion (eastern basin). For the western points (squares on Figure 4b) an important gap is observed in the distribution of MLD-Max values. There is no observation between 200 and 500 m.

Box plots in Figure 5 represent, for each bioregion (differentiated with color), the distribution of values computed on “Argo float” MLD and [Chl]SAT time series for six selected indices. To compare the “Argo float” distribution for the selected indices with their climatological value (available on Table 2), the climatological estimations are superimposed to box plots (red stars on Figure 5). From Table 4 and Figure 5f, it appears that DeltaInit values are very close to their “Climatological” counterpart (except for the “Bloom North-West”, “Intermittent North-West”, and “Intermittent Tyrrhenian” bioregions). DateInit values for both MLD and [Chl]SAT parameters are advanced, by 21 days on average, in the “Argo float” analysis compared with the “Climatological” analysis (compare Tables 4 and 2). The largest differences were observed for CHL-DateInit in the “Bloom North-West” bioregion (47 days). DateMax and DeltaMax values are generally unchanged between the “Argo float” and “Climatological” analyses (except again for “Bloom North-West” bioregion: MLD-DateMax is delayed by 15 days compared to the “Climatological” analysis, resulting in a shorter DeltaMax, Figures 5a–5c). In all bioregions (except “Intermittent Tyrrhenian”), the MLD-Max of “Climatological” analysis are lower than in the “Argo float” analysis (Figure 5d). This effect is particularly strong in the “Bloom North-West” bioregion where a factor of 5 is observed. Similarly, CHL-Max values are higher in the “Argo float” analysis than in...
the “Climatological” (Figure 5e). This trend is especially evident in bioregions having relatively high [Chl]SAT values (i.e., “Bloom North-West”, “Intermittent” bioregions, and “No Bloom 3 Algerian Basin”). Finally, the Corr index is systematically lower in the “Argo float” than in the “Climatological” analysis.

4. Discussion

4.1. General Patterns of Mediterranean MLD Dynamic and [Chl]SAT Phenology

[34] Phytoplankton phenology and seasonal cycle of MLD were simultaneously analyzed using an in situ database of MLD and satellite ocean color [Chl]SAT data. Available data were merged into bioregions (obtained from DR09), which are large oceanic zones considered to share similar patterns of the seasonal [Chl]SAT evolution. The resulting [Chl]SAT and MLD time series averaged over bioregions are consistent with seasonal cycles previously observed in the Mediterranean Sea [Bosc et al., 2004; D’Ortenzio et al., 2005; DR09; D’Ortenzio and Prieur, 2010]. The approach using bioregions therefore appears to be a pertinent manner to identify patterns in large oceanic data sets.

[35] While searching for relationships between external forcing and phytoplankton phenological response, the use of [Chl]SAT to represent phytoplankton biomass presents two main limitations. As the chlorophyll to carbon ratio exhibits a variability that is not easy to parameterize [Cullen, 1982; Geider et al., 1997; Behrenfeld et al., 2005], the interpretation of the ratio of the [Chl]SAT time series as biomass seasonal cycles requires particular caution. Consequently, a clear distinction between chlorophyll concentration and biomass was made, in order to avoid any ambiguity. Moreover, assuming constant chlorophyll to carbon ratio, variations in surface [Chl]SAT do not always represent changes in phytoplankton growth rate. This could be particularly relevant when deep turbulent mixing dilutes phytoplankton cells, yielding a [Chl]SAT decrease at the surface, while phytoplankton growth rate may be constant or positive (see Behrenfeld [2010] for an exhaustive discussion). However, as MLD does not necessarily match with the mixing layer depth (the depth reached by active turbulence at the time of observation [Brainerd and Gregg, 1995], the limitation of the [Chl]SAT as a proxy of biomass was accounted for and, contrarily to Behrenfeld [2010], the integrated contents were not used. Instead, using [Chl]SAT instead of integrated chlorophyll contents does not introduce an important bias in the visualization of the seasonal pattern of the phytoplankton dynamics [Boss and Behrenfeld, 2010].

[36] Keeping in mind the above limitations, a set of indices was introduced to describe the seasonal cycles of MLD and [Chl]SAT. Some of them were previously used in the literature (i.e., CHL-DateMax [Siegel et al., 2002; Henson et al., 2006], Corr [Henson et al., 2009], CHL-DateMax and CHL-Max [Racault et al., 2012], MLD-DateMax, MLD-Max [de Boyer Montégut et al., 2004; Carton et al., 2008]), while others were developed specifically in this paper (i.e., DeltaMax, Deltaxit). The analysis of the indices confirmed some aspects of the Mediterranean MLD and [Chl]SAT behaviors already observed, though newly introduced elements require further analysis: [37] (1) It can be confirmed that eastern and western basins are not equivalent regarding the MLD and [Chl]SAT range of values [Moutin and Raimbault, 2002; Bosc et al., 2004; D’Ortenzio et al., 2005]. Higher CHL-Max values and lower MLD-Max values were observed in the western bioregions than in the eastern ones (with the exception of the “Bloom North-West” region that displayed the highest MLD-Max values).

[38] (2) As previously observed [Napolitano et al., 2000; Gacic et al., 2002; Marty et al., 2002], this study confirmed that, in the Mediterranean, high [Chl]SAT values are observed in bioregions characterized by deep MLD. Indeed, CHL-Max and MLD-Max present a positive trend when passing from “No Bloom” to “Intermittent” and finally to “Bloom” bioregions. The general principle: “deeper MLD implies higher [Chl]SAT” therefore seems to be roughly confirmed at the scale of Mediterranean subbasins. However, within a same bioregion, no positive relationship between MLD-Max and CHL-Max was observed. More specifically, the “Interannual” and “Argo float” analyses showed that, inside “Bloom” or “No Bloom” bioregions, the MLD-Max observations are generally highly variable whereas CHL-Max observations remain stable (Figures 4 and Table S1). This result suggests that although the intensity of winter mixing appears to have an impact on the general dynamics of phytoplankton phenology (i.e., “Bloom” or “No Bloom”), other parameters than solely MLD-Max determines the value of CHL-Max.

[39] The “Interannual” and “Argo float” analyses showed that high interannual and spatial variabilities characterize “Intermittent”, and, to a lesser extent, “Bloom” bioregions (as already hypothesized by DR09). The specific behavior of the cycle 2006/2007 in the “Bloom North-West” bioregion (Figure 3a) clearly illustrates the impact of the interannual variability. In these bioregions, [Chl]SAT annual dynamics may oscillate between typical “Bloom” and “No Bloom” dynamics, depending on the interannual variability of meteorological factors (i.e., wind stress and heat fluxes). In the future, if climate change tends to reduce wind stress and weaken winter heat fluxes [Somot et al., 2006], the occurrence of the “No Bloom” dynamics, compared to the “Bloom” dynamics, may then increase.

[40] All the above observations have already been identified for Mediterranean Sea in the past [e.g., Bernardello et al., 2012; Lazzari et al., 2012; Volpe et al., 2012]. However, the previous studies focused mostly on the absolute values of the phytoplankton biomass and MLD peaks (i.e., our MLD-Max and CHL-Max indices), neglecting the temporal dimension. In particular, the analysis of the temporal differences between the dates of major events of the MLD and phytoplankton biomass time series (our DeltaMax and Deltaxit indices) has never yet been addressed before in the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, we demonstrated that the different averaging procedures (i.e., “Climatological,” “Interannual,” and “Argo floats” analysis) affect the values of our Max indices. On the other hand, we demonstrated that delta indices appear less affected by the averaging procedures. Therefore, in the following, we will focus on these two indices.
[41] Because the DeltaInit index does not relevantly change with the analysis (i.e., “Climatological,” “Interannual,” or “Argo float”), we assumed that it reflects a realistic pattern of the MLD and [Chl]SAT series. In the different Mediterranean bioregions, DeltaInit values cluster around 30 days, which indicates that the annual increase of [Chl]SAT follows the seasonal deepening of the MLD. Interestingly, the [Chl]SAT increase always occurs in November/early December in the whole basin, though the date of deepening of the MLD is more variable (MLD-DateInit spans between September and November). This apparent contradiction could be solved by evoking the spatial distribution of nutrients in the basin and its interplay with the amplitude of the mixing (i.e., MLD-Max). This will be discussed further.

[42] Similar to DeltaInit, the DeltaMax index appears to be independent of the averaging method used to evaluate it. With the noticeable exception of the “Bloom North-West” bioregion, no major difference was observed between the estimations of DeltaMax in the “Climatological,” “Interannual,” and “Argo float” analyses, which indicates that DeltaMax represents a realistic pattern of the MLD and [Chl]SAT series in the Mediterranean. For the “Bloom North-West” bioregion, the DeltaMax at “Climatological” scale (48 days) strongly differs from the “Interannual” and “Argo float” estimations (31 and 27 days, respectively). This time lag of 48 days between MLD-Max and CHL-Max appears too large to represent a realistic phytoplankton response to MLD variations. It is assumed to be an artifact due to the averaging procedure, and, in the further discussion on the “Bloom” bioregions, we will only consider the DeltaMax estimations derived from the “Interannual” and “Argo float” analyses. A clear distinction between the “Bloom” and “Intermittent” and the “No Bloom” bioregions for the DeltaMax index emerges from our analysis when we consider averaged values over bioregions. In the “No Bloom” bioregions, despite important individual variability in the “Interannual” and “Argo float” analyses, the two annual maxima (MLD and [Chl]SAT) coincide temporally, occurring in most cases in February. For the “Bloom” and, to a lesser extent, for the “Intermittent” bioregions, the [Chl]SAT maxima are delayed respect to the MLD peaks. The variability of the DeltaMax index among the bioregions is primarily induced by CHL-DateMax, as the MLD-DateMax is almost constant in February. This is evident in the “Argo floats” analysis, where CHL-DateMax exhibits a significant delay (student test 95%) when passing from “No Bloom”, to “Intermittent” and to “Bloom” regime (Figure 5). In addition, the largest values of DeltaMax are generally associated to the highest values of CHL-Max and MLD-Max observed in the Mediterranean (i.e., in the “Bloom” and the “Intermittent” regions), although, as for the positive relationship between MLD-Max and CHL-Max (see above), this result only seems true at the scale of the Mediterranean basin. Overall, we demonstrated that the temporal difference between MLD-Max and CHL-Max (i.e., the index DeltaMax) is an important feature of MLD and [Chl]SAT time series that differentiates the two dominant trophic regimes that coexist in the Mediterranean Sea.

[43] In summary, the “Intermittent” bioregions, displaying typical “Bloom” like and “No Bloom” like time series, could be considered as hinge regions between “Bloom” and “No Bloom” bioregions and, therefore, would be key areas in the Mediterranean Sea. However, as we did not detect a clear specific pattern representing “Intermittent” MLD and [Chl]SAT time series, the next discussion will focus only on “Bloom” and “No Bloom” bioregions. In the “No Bloom” bioregions the MLD seasonal increase occurs 1 month before [Chl]SAT seasonal increase, whereas MLD and [Chl]SAT maxima are concomitant. The [Chl]SAT peaks, however, remain relatively low, and they are independent of the amplitude of the MLD-Max. In the “Bloom” bioregion, we similarly observe a delay in the seasonal [Chl]SAT increase compared to the MLD increase. Additionally, in most cases, a time lag of about 30 days was observed between the two peaks (MLD peak occurring before [Chl]SAT peak).

[44] As already introduced, MLD has an impact on the phytoplankton phenology mostly because it controls the availability of nutrients and light. Although solar radiation is relatively high throughout the year in temperate and subtropical regions (as the Mediterranean), deep MLD could have a role in redistributing phytoplankton through the water column. Subsequently, phytoplankton cells could spend significant periods of time outside of the illuminated depths, and its growth could therefore be affected, even in a high-nutrient environment. Consequently, it could impact on the date and the intensity of the [Chl]SAT events.

[45] To explain the “Bloom” and “No Bloom” DeltaInit and DeltaMax differences, an additional analysis was introduced, considering nutrients and light observations as well. The limitation of the data availability (particularly important for the nutrients) prevents a complete, basinwide analysis. Therefore, focus is put on two bioregions (i.e., “Bloom North-West” and “No Bloom 1 Ionian”) considered as representative of their trophic regime.

4.2. Abiotic Factors Controlling the Mediterranean Phenological Regimes

[46] To verify how MLD controls light and nutrient availability for phytoplankton in the Mediterranean area, MLD data were concurrently analyzed with the nitracline depth (Dnit) and the critical depth (Dcr) estimations. The first was considered as a proxy of the nutricline depth, and the second as an estimator of the light limitation depth. Dcr, defined as the depth where integrated phytoplankton productivity in the layer above this depth equals integrated losses due to respiration [Sverdrup, 1953], was estimated using the following equation [Siegel et al., 2002]:

\[
\frac{1}{K_{P A R} \cdot D_{cr}} (1 - e^{-K_{P A R} D_{cr}}) = \frac{I_{c}}{P A R}
\]

where \(I_{c}\) is the irradiance for which net community production equals net community respiration (the compensation irradiance), PAR is the photosynthetically available radiation at the surface, and \(K_{P A R}\) is the PAR diffuse attenuation coefficient. Monthly climatological estimations of Dcr were computed, using a SeaWiFS monthly climatology of PAR and \(K_{P A R}\left(\lambda = 490\right)\), transformed into \(K_{P A R}\) with Rochford et al. [2001] equations. As there is no consensus concerning the \(I_{c}\) values [Siegel et al., 2002], \(D_{cr}\) was computed for a range of \(I_{c}\) values spanning from 0.5 to 2 mol photons m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\).
 estimations from Siegel et al. [2002] range between 1 and 1.5 mol photons m\(^{-2}\) d\(^{-1}\). Then, for each bioregion, we calculated the probabilities \(P_{\text{NUT}}\) and \(P_{\text{LIGHT}}\) that MLD is deeper than \(D_{\text{nit}}\) (equation (2)) or \(D_{\text{cr}}\) (equation (3)).

\[
P_{\text{NUT}} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n_{\text{nit}}} \sum_{j=1}^{n_{\text{MLD}}} f(D_{\text{nit},i}, MLD_j)}{n_{\text{nit}} \times n_{\text{MLD}}},
\]

with \(f(D_{\text{nit},i}, MLD_j) = 1\) if \(D_{\text{nit},i} \leq MLD_j\) and 0 otherwise

\[
P_{\text{LIGHT}}(I_c) = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n_{\text{MLD}}} f(D_{\text{cr}}, I_c, MLD_j)}{n_{\text{MLD}}},
\]

with \(f(D_{\text{cr}}, I_c, MLD_j) = 1\) if \(D_{\text{cr},j} \leq MLD_j\) and 0 otherwise

In equations (2) and (3), \(D_{\text{nit},i}\) indicates the \(i\)th estimation of \(D_{\text{nit}}\) and MLD, the \(j\)th estimation of the MLD for a given month and a given bioregion. \(n_{\text{nit}}\) and \(n_{\text{MLD}}\) are, respectively, the number of available \(D_{\text{nit}}\) observations and MLD observations. In equation (3), all the MLD observations are compared to the unique (and climatological) estimation of \(D_{\text{cr}}\), whereas all possible combinations between MLD and \(D_{\text{nit}}\) observations are tested in equation (2). The resulting distribution of \(P_{\text{NUT}}\) and \(P_{\text{LIGHT}}\) for the “Bloom North-West” and “No Bloom 1 Ionian” bioregions is displayed in Figure 6.

In the “Bloom North-West” bioregion, \(P_{\text{NUT}}\) values start to be greater than zero in November, indicating that, episodically, nutrient limitation is relaxed (Figure 6a). As \(P_{\text{LIGHT}}\) is zero, there is no light limitation for phytoplankton growth (Figure 6c). The concurrent absence of light and nutrient limitations is consistent with the initiation of [Chl]\(_{\text{SAT}}\) increase that occurs in November/early December (CHL-DateInit, Tables 2–4). In January and February, \(P_{\text{NUT}}\) is very close to 1, indicating that, during this period, MLD is permanently deeper than the nitracline depth (Figure 6a). Yet, MLD can also be shallow during this period (Figure 2), and nitrate concentration at the surface should
be permanently superior to 1 \( \mu M \). During the same period, whatever the \( I \) value, \( P_{\text{LIGHT}} \) is not null (ranges between 0.05 and 0.45, Figure 6c), suggesting that during deep mixed layer events, phytoplankton accumulation is prevented. During the winter period, a deficit of light would prevent the total utilization of nitrate stocks in surface layers by phytoplankton. When \( P_{\text{LIGHT}} \) starts to decrease (in March), \( P_{\text{NUT}} \) is still high (about 0.9), both limiting conditions are relaxed, and a sharp increase in \([\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}}\) is observed. The light limitation when MLD is the deepest (January/February) produces a delay between nitrate supplies and consumption, which explains a \( \Delta \text{DeltaMax} \) of 30 days.

\[ [50] \text{In the “No Bloom I Ionian” bioregion, } P_{\text{LIGHT}} \text{ is permanently equal to zero across the whole year (Figure 6d), indicating that for this type of bioregion ("No Bloom"), only the variability of } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ could be relevant. } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ is close to zero for most of the year, except during winter months (Figure 6b). Although MLD starts to deepen in October (Table 3), it is only in November that we first observe } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ values superior to zero, indicating that an efficient, although weak, uptake of nitrates in the surface layers is occurring. The delay in CHL-DateInit compared to MLD-DateInit (DeltaInit \sim 30 \text{ days}), might be explained by null values of } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ before November. Moreover, as light is never limiting, } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ cycle follows the } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ cycle, with the } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ maxima observed concomitantly to the } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ maxima. It would explain the DeltaMax low values for the “No Bloom” bioregions. Finally, } P_{\text{NUT}} \text{ values remain low during winter months (compared to the “Bloom” bioregion, compare Figures 6a and 6b), implying that the nutrient limitation is only episodically relaxed, and also explaining the low values of CHL-Max observed in these bioregions. In other terms, it is hypothesized that, in spite of a deep MLD in the “No Bloom” bioregions, the position of the nutricline is too deep to allow nutrient accumulation in surface during winter. Only episodic nutrient supplies to the surface seem possible.} \]

\[ [51] \text{It appears that from June to December the two bioregions presented above display similar mechanisms for the regulation of phytoplankton growth. This situation is marked by } P_{\text{LIGHT}} = 0 \text{ and an increase of } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ concurrent to the increase of MLD in November/December. One can assume that the progressive increase of } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ may be due to the progressive entrainment of subsurface waters (waters close to the nutricline, } 0 < P_{\text{NUT}} < 1 \text{), which would increase the carrying capacity of the system. This } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ increase clearly corresponds to an “entrainment bloom” as defined by Cullen et al. [2002]. In the “No Bloom” bioregion, this “entrainment bloom” persists until water column stratification takes place in March, whereas in the “Bloom” bioregion a decoupling between large nutrients supplies and slow phytoplankton uptake appears in January/February. Subsequently, the important } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ increase in March/April in the “Bloom” bioregion corresponds to a “detrainment bloom” as defined by Cullen et al. [2002]. The “Detrainment Bloom” occurs when water column stratification is induced in deep mixing layers. Extrapolating these results to the Mediterranean Sea, it appears that the “entrainment bloom” situation is dominant over the basin, whereas the “detrainment bloom” situation should be considered as an exception.} \]

5. Conclusion

\[ [52] \text{The phytoplankton phenomenology proves to be an invaluable tool for assessing the extent to which marine ecosystems react to external forcing [Li et al., 2010]. This is particularly true in the Mediterranean Sea, which is considered to be a “hot spot” for the climatic change [Giorgi, 2006]. Mediterranean ecosystems could be considered as “sentinels” to anticipate the whole global ocean response to climatic change [Siokou-Frangou et al., 2010] and, in this context, phytoplankton phenomenological indices represent precious information regarding the possible variations induced by environmental conditions. Phenological indices in the ocean can be correlated with an evaluation of the external abiotic forcing, which is primarily represented by MLD dynamics.} \]

\[ [53] \text{To address this topic, a large data set of observations (satellite and in situ) has been assembled to generate, using different averaging methods, concomitant annual MLD and } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ cycles. The bioregionalization proposed by DR09 was used as a geographical framework to analyze the available data and maximize their interpretation. To quantitatively analyze MLD and } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ time series, several indices were calculated from each annual MLD and } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ time series. Specific emphasis was put on the relevance of delta indices.} \]

\[ [54] \text{The coexistence in the Mediterranean Sea of two dominant phenological regimes, named “Bloom” and “No Bloom”, was confirmed. The first appears close to what is observed in temperate seas, whereas the second is similar to the regimes of subtropical areas [Longhurst, 2006]. It was demonstrated that the MLD plays a key role in determining the phenomenological cycle (i.e., “Bloom” or “No Bloom”). Furthermore, the two dynamics only diverge between December/January and early summer. In fact, a } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ increase was always found to be followed by a MLD deepening in late fall (DeltaInit stable around 30 days) in all regions of the Mediterranean Sea. However, the time lag between MLD and } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ peaks (i.e., DeltaMax) diverges between “Bloom” and “No Bloom” regimes. “No Bloom” regime is characterized by concomitant MLD and } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ peaks, whereas, in the “Bloom” regime, MLD peak precedes } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ peak by about 30 days. This difference points out that the “Bloom” and “No Bloom” bioregions are not exclusively differentiated by the value of } [\text{Chl}]_{\text{SAT}} \text{ and MLD annual maxima, but that the date of these events is also relevant.} \]

\[ [55] \text{For the “No Bloom” regime, observations indicate that phytoplankton would never be limited by light, whatever the MLD, and would even grow during the winter period thanks to small nutrient inputs. For the “Bloom” regime, an accumulation of nutrients in surface waters during winter was hypothesized, due to a decoupling between important supplies by deep mixing and a low uptake rate by phytoplankton, which would be episodically limited by a deficit of light. During spring, when both nutrient and light limitations are removed, phytoplankton would exponentially grow. Hence, the “Bloom” regime of the Mediterranean Sea would fit the theoretical model of Sverdrup [1953]. According to Sverdrup [1953], a bloom begins as soon as the MLD becomes shallower than the critical depth. Even if the Sverdrup [1953] theory has been criticized on specific points (i.e., the relative importance of turbulence intensity compared with MLD [Huisman et al., 1999; Taylor and Ferraris, 2011] or concerning the too simplistic} \]
representation of losses due to respiration in the model
(Smetacek and Passow, 1990; Behrenfeld, 2010), this theory has been roughly verified in this study with the
demonstration that, during certain winters, MLD can be epo-
chologically deeper than the critical depth and that phytoplankton growth is limited.

[56] To fully understand the impact of abiotic forcing on phytoplankton phenology, it would be best to observe, con-
tinuously and over the whole water column, turbulence, irra-
diance, nutrient concentration, and phytoplankton biomass. As these variables are not easily measurable, proxies are gen-
erally used. Indeed, studies that focus on global ocean or on
large oceanic regions generally used [Chl] with either MLD cloromatologies [Obata et al., 1996; Wilson and Coles, 2005] or MLD estimations derived from model [Henson et al., 2009; Chriswell et al., 2013] or sea surface temperature (SST, used as proxy of MLD [Folpe et al., 2012]). In the present study, similarly to Martinez et al. [2011] and Henson et al. [2006], in situ MLD observations and [Chl] were used. In this context, the Mediterranean Sea, one of the most observed regions of the global ocean, is certainly an ideal place to carry out similar analysis. Nevertheless, the distribu-
ition of in situ observations is also sparse over the Mediterrane-
ian Sea. Consequently, large geographic units (i.e., the bioregions) and strong averaging procedures had to be used (for the nutrient analysis only climatological analysis over a
bioregion) and strong averaging procedures had to be used
for the nutrient analysis only climatological analysis over a
bioregion). In consequence, interpretation of the impact of abiotic forcing on phytoplankton phenology was significantly limited. However, this work demonstrates that the synergy between ocean color satellite data and T/S profiles of Argo floats can provide precious information. In this context, it is quite probable that, as already demonstrated on certain specific examples [Boss et al., 2008; Boss and Behrenfeld, 2010; Johnson et al., 2010], time series derived from Argo floats equipped with biogeochemical sensors will strongly improve our interpretation of the mechanisms that control phytoplankton growth.

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