I: Abstract

Ever since the revolutionary discovery by the Fermi mission that active galactic nuclei (AGN) produce copious amounts of high-energy emission, its origin has remained elusive. Extremely bright gamma-ray flashes in the high-energy gamma-ray regime (GeV-TeV) at minutes to hours timescales in blazars (jetted AGN pointed towards our line-of-sight) have attracted the astronomical community’s attention as they suggest that particles can be accelerated with impressive efficiency in tiny magnetized regions within extended sources. Using Fermi Large Area Telescope (LAT) data, we investigate the gamma-ray flux variations in the nearby blazar BL Lac (BL Lac). This process involves analyzing and filtering the Fermi data using the software package ScienceTools and developing Python code for automatic analysis procedure. We found that the source exhibits multiple modes of flaring activity. Faster flares are superimposed on top of broad outbursts. We detected a significant correlation between photon flux and photon index variations, which suggests that the gamma-ray variations in the source are mostly produced by radiative processes.

II: Active Galactic Nuclei

- AGN—the most powerful objects in the universe—are powered by supermassive black holes (SMBHs) accreting surrounding matter. Radio-loud AGN launch a relativistic jet perpendicular to the accretion disk, which give way to radio lobes extended up to megaparsecs in size.
- Blazars (jetted AGN aligned close to our line-of-sight) constitute a unique laboratory to probe the inner jet emanating from the central engine. They are characterized by powerful, non-thermal emission ranging from radio to gamma-ray bands and exhibit strong variability over minute to month timescales. Radio components detected in VLBI observations often exhibit superluminal motion.

III: Methods

- Used data from 2008-2017 to investigate photon flux and index variations in BL Lac
- Divided data into two week intervals
- Conducted an unbinned likelihood analysis
- Source spectrum modeled using a simple power law defined as $N(E) = N_0 E^{-\Gamma}$ ($N_0$ is the prefactor and $\Gamma$ is the power law index)
- Multiple modes of flaring activity—faster flares superimposed on broad outbursts—are observed in BL Lac.
- Gamma-ray flux variations significantly correlate with photon index variations such that the spectrum gets harder (flatter) when the source gets brighter.
- Harder-when-brighter trend indicates that the gamma-rays variations are driven by radiation processes.

IV: Results

- Photon flux variations observed in BL Lac. We detected multiple modes of flaring activity—faster flares are superimposed on broad outbursts.
- Photon index variations observed in BL Lac.
- Photon index versus photon flux variations.

V: Summary

- Multiple modes of flaring activity—faster flares superimposed on broad outbursts—are observed in BL Lac.
- Gamma-ray flux variations significantly correlate with photon index variations such that the spectrum gets harder (flatter) when the source gets brighter.
- Harder-when-brighter trend indicates that the gamma-rays variations are driven by radiation processes.

VI: Acknowledgements and References

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Background image courtesy of Earth Changes Company, LLC.