Height systems

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Why bother about height systems?

- give a meaning to a value defined for height
- combination of measurements from different sources
  - GPS measurements vs. leveling measurements
- three-dimensional calculations
  - SAR interferometry
Relevant terms

- spheriod
  - any surface resembling a sphere
  - an ellipsoid of revolution

- ellipsoid
  - defined by axes, flattening and eccentricity

- flattening and eccentricity
  - characterize the deviation from a sphere
Approximation vs. Reality

- ellipsoid is a good approximation to the shape of the Earth but not an exact representation
- Earth surface is everywhere perpendicular to the direction of gravity
  → equipotential surface
- true shape of the Earth is known as geoid
• geoid undulation: vertical separation between geoid and reference ellipsoid
  • differences between ± 100 m
  • global root mean square of around 30 m
- **vertical deflection**: angle between the ellipsoid normal and the plumb line
  - usually resolved in a north-south component $\xi$
  - and an east-west component $\eta$
  - angles usually amount to a few arc seconds
Global earth model

- geoid defined by a set of coefficients of a spherical harmonic expansion
  → global earth model

- several models available
  - OSU91
  - Earth Geopotential Model 1996 (EGM96)
different height systems can be related to each other by the geopotential number $C$

$$C = W_0 - W = \int_{\text{geoid}}^{\text{point}} g \, dn$$

- $W$ and $W_0$: the potentials of gravity of a point and the geoid
- $g$: gravity value
- $dn$: leveling increment
Geopotential number

- different heights calculated by dividing the geopotential number by a gravity value
Heights

- **dynamic height**
  - constant normal gravity $\gamma_0$ for an arbitrary standard latitude (usually 45 degrees)
  - no geometrical meaning

- **orthometric height**
  - natural “height above sea level”
  - measured along the current plumb line from the foot point on the geoid and the point on the surface
  - gravity value: mean gravity
Heights

- normal height
  - vertical distance from terrain surface to the ellipsoid reduced by the height anomaly
  - measured along the ellipsoidal normal
  - gravity value: mean normal gravity
Solution

- ellipsoid is convenient reference frame
  - mathematical figure
  - provides good approximation to the geoid

- geoid better height reference system
  - reference to mean sea level allows to use tide gauges as height reference points
  - physical significance: ensures horizontal representation of water surfaces such lakes and seas