Towards an effective characterization of root electrical properties: a spectroscopic approach

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Motivation

The application of geophysical methods to root investigation is increasing in recent years because of the limitations associated with the use of traditional methods (root excavation, monoliths, minirhizotron etc.). Point sampling is only partially satisfactory as a result of the spatial variability and dynamics of the root zone. Geophysical methods address these limitations by offering high resolution and non-invasive approaches to root investigation. Among various geophysical methods used for root studies, low frequency electrical methods are of great interest because they target direct electrical response of the roots. Recent studies (Weigand and Kemna 2017; Mary et al. 2017) have reported a low frequency polarization of root systems and have shown that spectral induced polarization and electrical impedance tomography holds a promising future for root system characterization. Despite these significant improvements, there is still a knowledge gap regarding the electrical response of fine roots at the segment scale which is essential to account for the effect of roots in the estimation of soil moisture content of rooted soils.

Methods

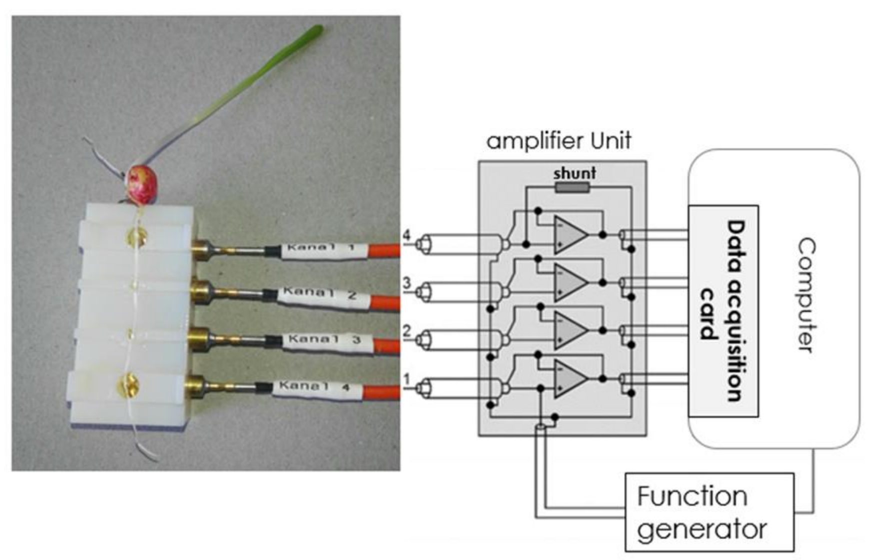


Figure 1. Measurement Set-up
- The root is mounted on the sample holder, in a channel filled with conductivity gel.
- The electrodes are retracted from the channel such that contact with root is only established through the gel.

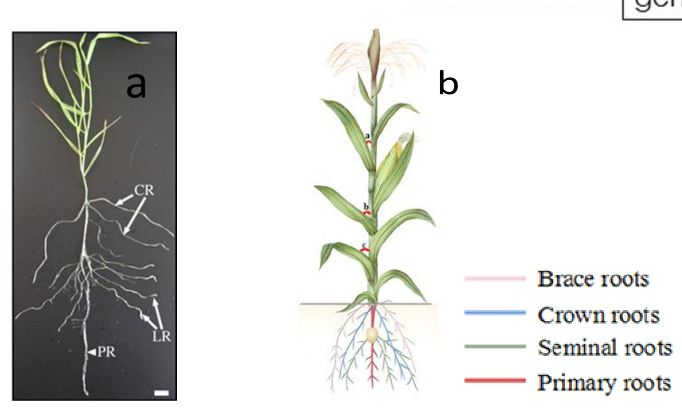


Figure 2. Test plants (a) Brachypodium plant, composed of a primary root(PR), crown roots (CR) and lateral roots (LR) (Pacheco-Villalobos and Hardtke 2012) (b) Maize plant, showing the roots in colour (Gong et al. 2015)

- Plants grown in sand
- 32 plants were sampled, Maize (16 plants) and Brachypodium (16 plants)
- Root diameter measured with a digital calliper
- Impedance and phase measurement on primary roots (at maturation zone)
- Root resistivity is expressed as

$$\rho_r = Z_r \frac{\pi D_r^2}{4L_r}$$

Results

Numerical correction of data

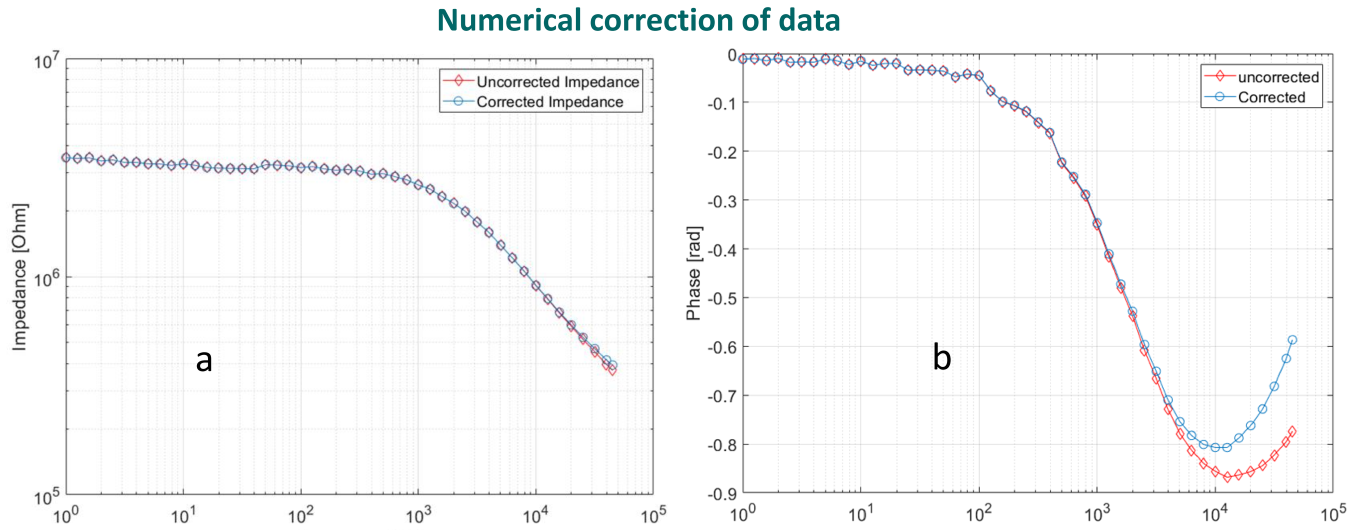


Figure 3. Numerical correction of a) impedance and b) phase data.
- Correction is used to minimize the error due to parasitic leakage currents
- By first taking reciprocal measurement before normal, the true excitation current is calculated using a matlab program
- With this, true sample impedance is determined
- Phase value peaked at 0.87 rad before correction but reduced to 0.81 rad after the correction.
- The observed EM effect is 0.06 rad which is smaller than the polarization effect observed in the root.

Calibration and validation

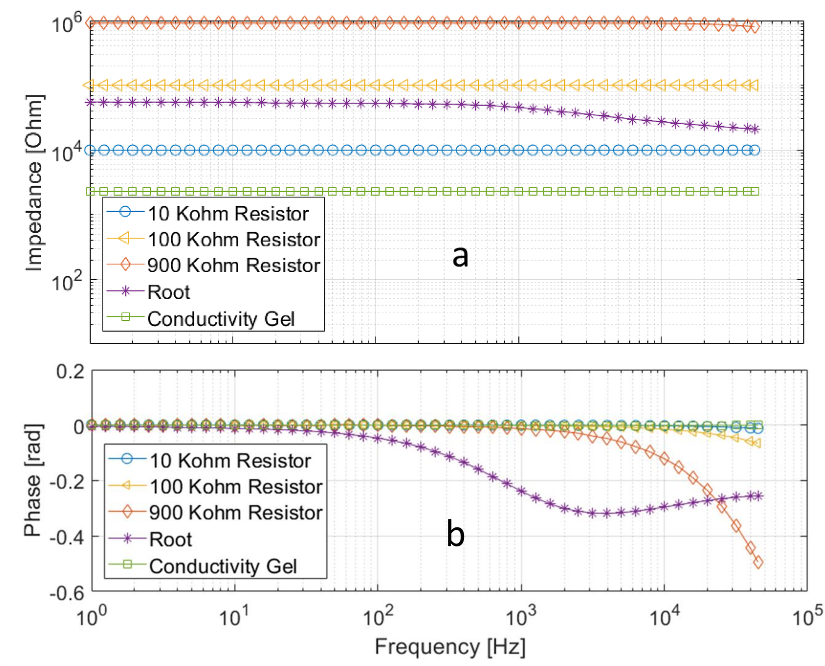
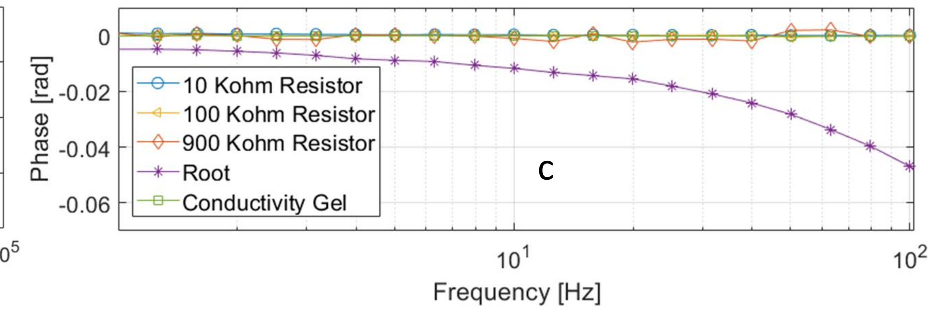


Figure 4. Validation of measurement set-up.
(a) The impedance values of three ideal resistors and conductivity gel compared to that of the root. The measured impedances of the resistors matched their true values as expected but they exhibited the EM coupling effect at frequencies above 10 KHz. The root polarized strongly with a peak of 320 mrad The conductivity gel showed a phase response of 1.2 mrad which is very small compared to that of the root. (b) The phase response of the resistors and conductivity gel compared to that of the root. The resistors showed no phase response. (c) Phase response at low frequencies below 100 Hz, showing a strong polarization response of the root at length scales.



Intra-species and Inter-species variability

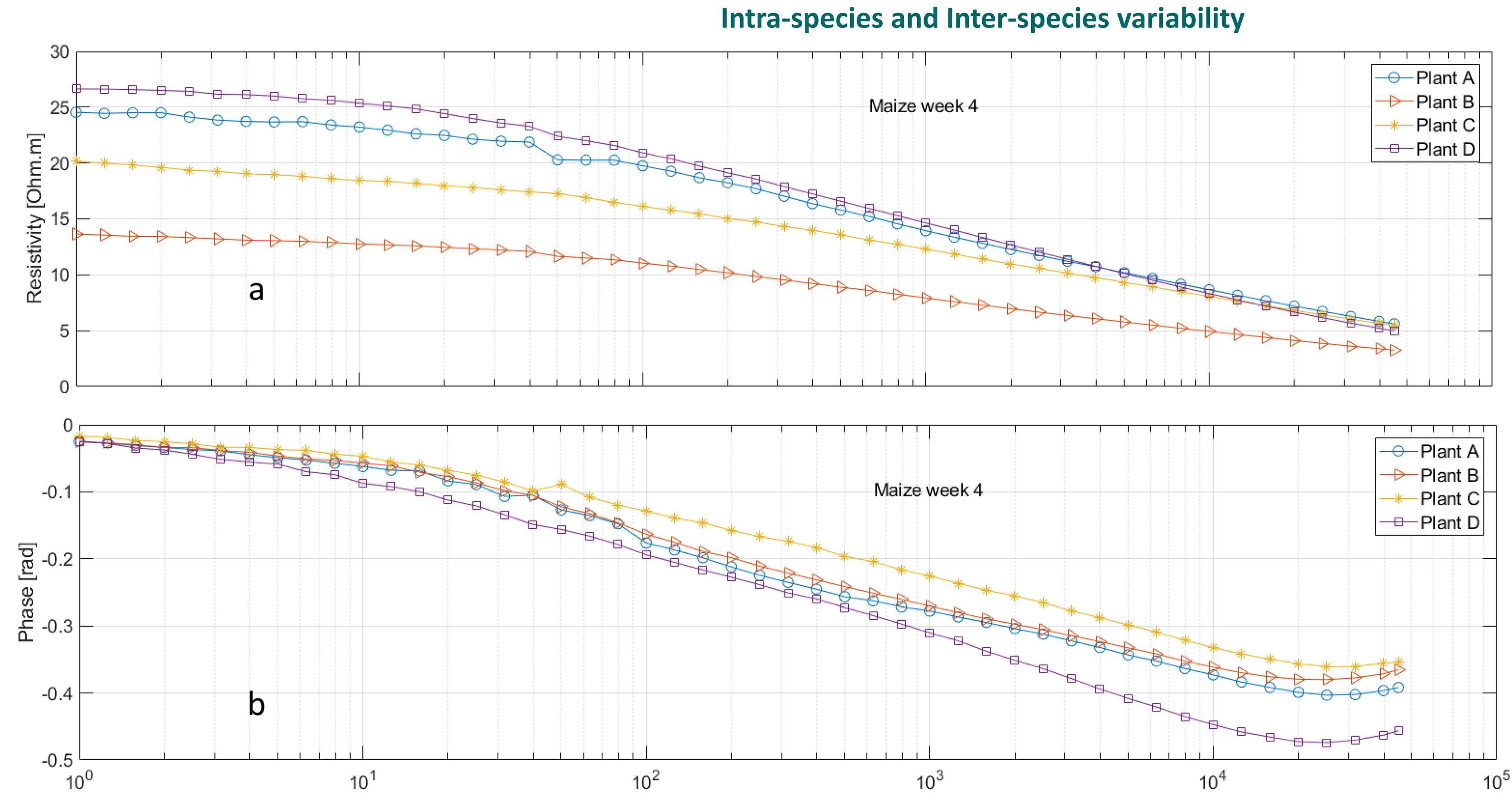


Figure 5. Intra-species variability. (a - b) The resistivity and phase responses of 4 maize plants (A, B, C and D) of same age (27 days) grown under same conditions are compared. They showed similar electrical signatures with minor variations.

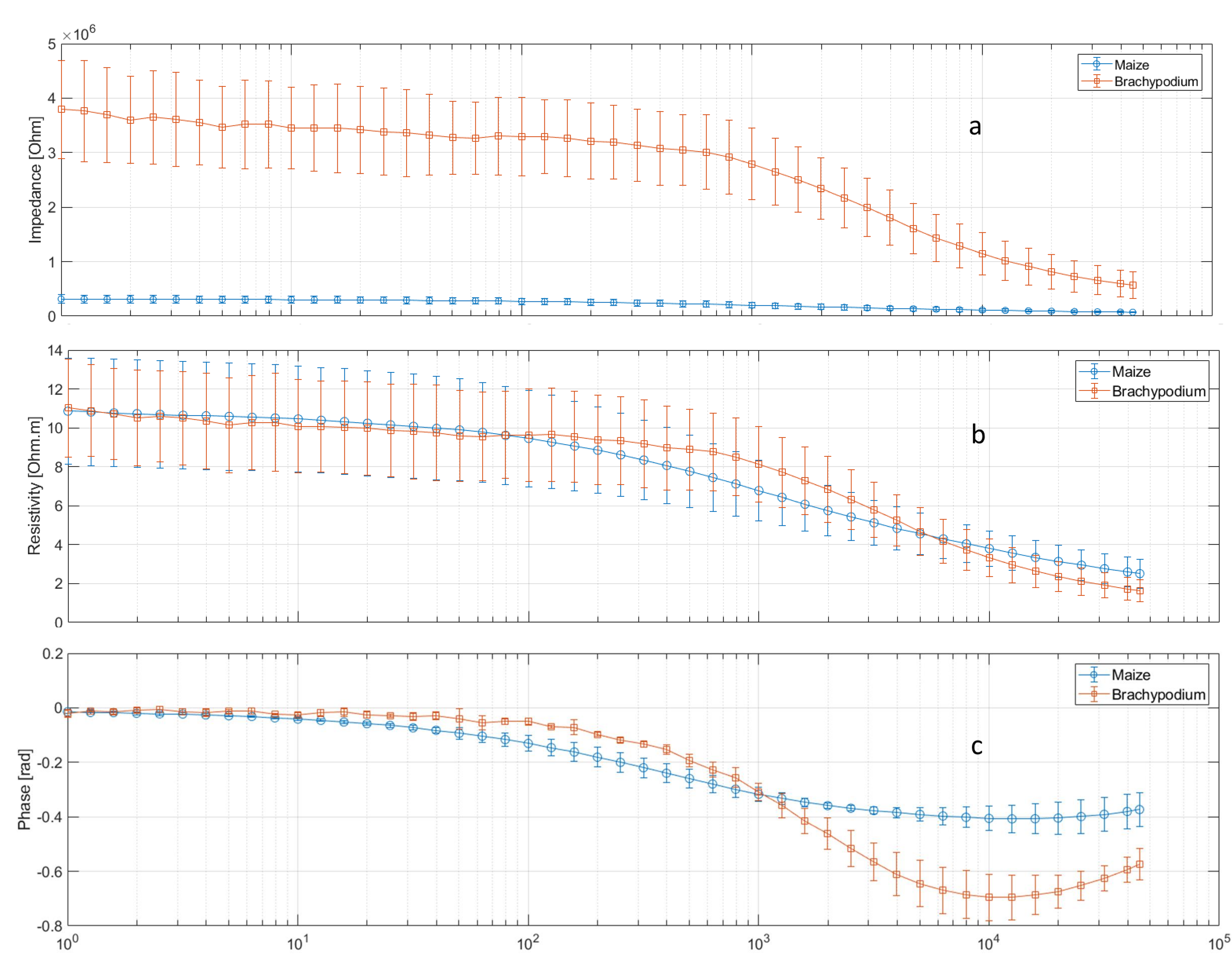


Figure 6. Inter-species variability. Comparing average electrical responses of several maize and brachipodium plant roots at 8 days.

(a) Average impedance of maize root compared to Brachypodium root. Maize showed lower impedance (315 KΩ) with standard deviation of 74 KΩ, while that of brachipodium was higher (3.7 MΩ) with standard deviation of 0.9 MΩ.

(b) Resistivity values of both species showing only minor variations.

(c) Phase responses of both species

- Strong variation is observed between both species.
- Brachypodium roots polarized more strongly with a peak value of 700 mrad compared to maize root with a polarization peak value of 410 mrad.

Age effect on the root electrical response

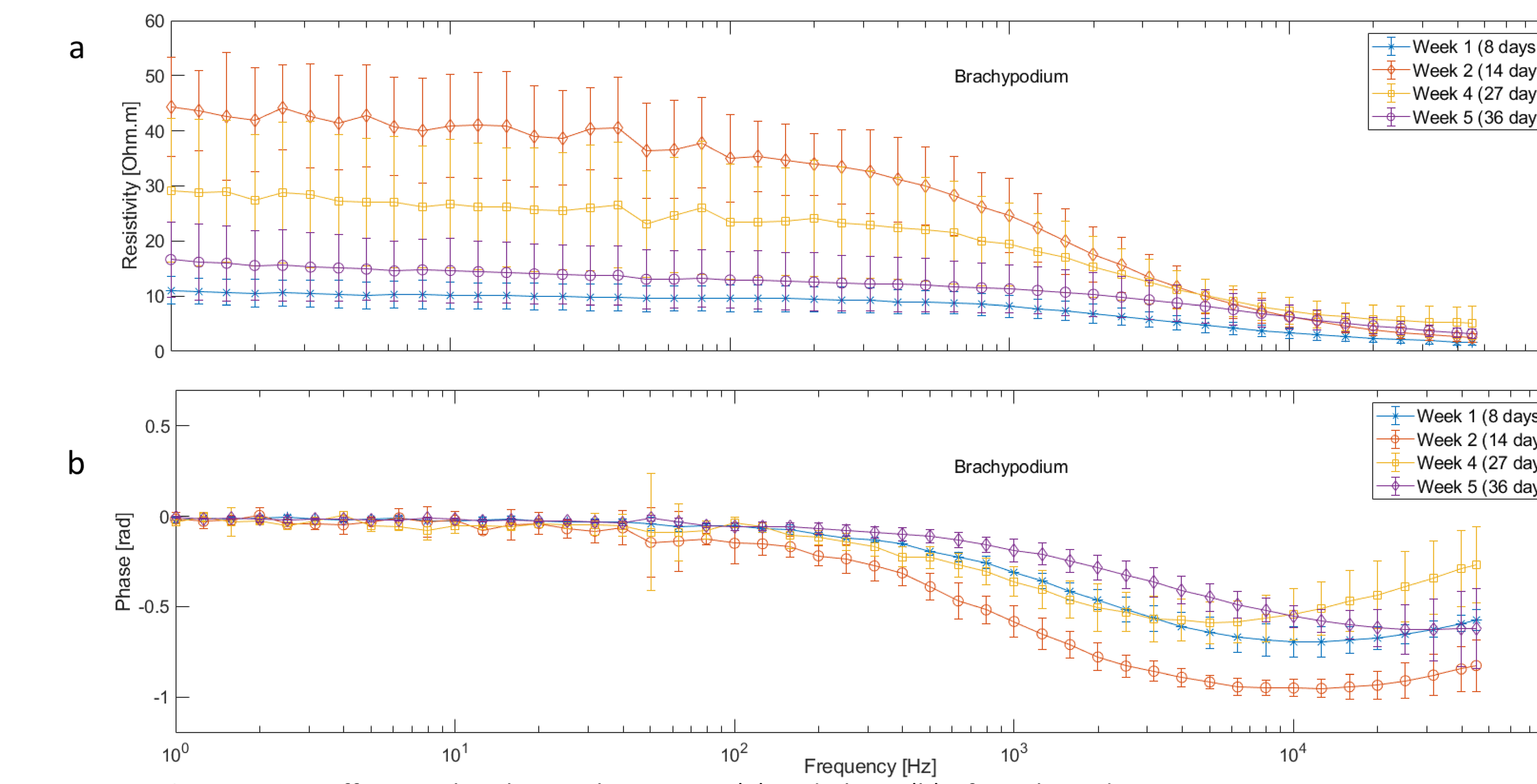


Figure 7. Age effect on the electrical resistivity (a) and phase (b) of Brachypodium roots
- Average response from different plants is shown here, with the error bars indicating the standard deviation.
- There is a trend of increase and decrease of resistivity and phase with age
- This could be due to growth and maturation of the root

Microscopic analysis of current pathways in roots

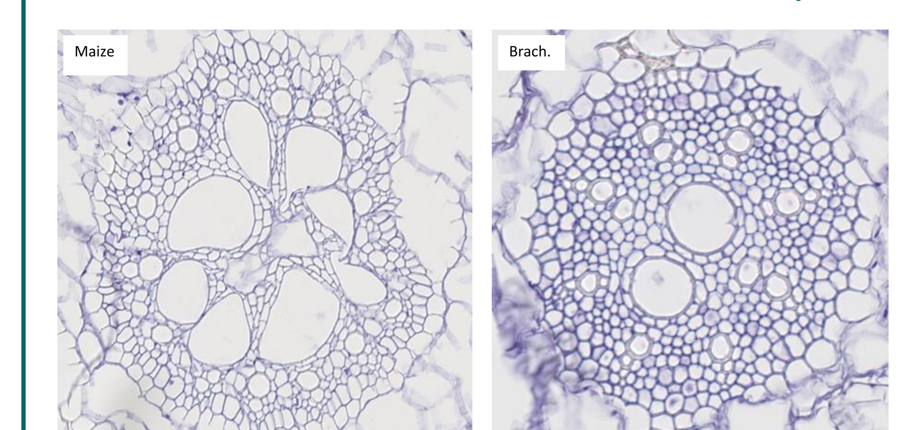


Figure 8. Microscopic section of Maize and Brachypodium primary roots at 24 days, sectioned at the maturation zone with the presence of root hairs.
- Brachypodium root is smaller in size with densely packed cortex cells
- Maize is larger in size, with cortex cells less densely packed

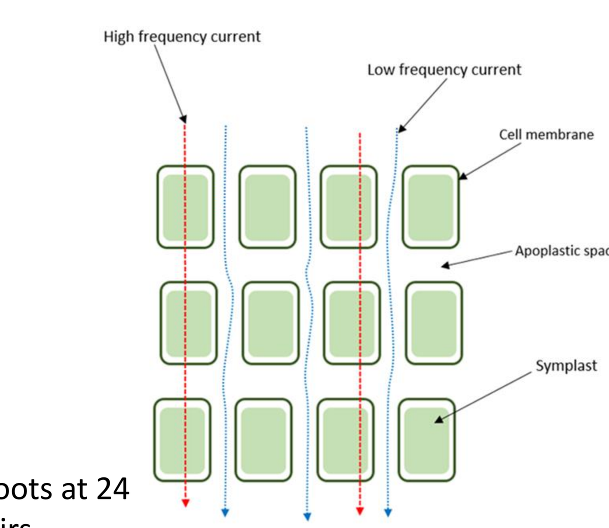


Figure 9. Current passage in roots at low and high frequencies. (see Bera et al.
- At 10 KHz, we assume that current will pass through all the root cells 2016 and Repo et al. 2012).

Perspectives

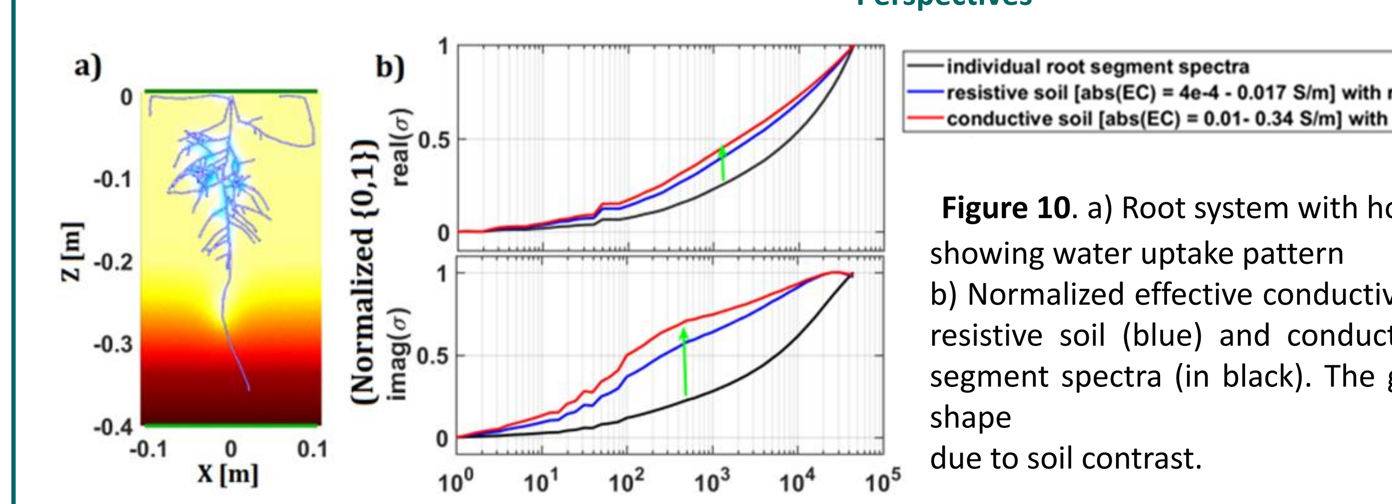


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Figure 10. a) Root system with horizontal electrodes (green line) showing water uptake pattern
b) Normalized effective conductivity (real and imaginary part) spectra for resistive soil (blue) and conductive soil (red) along with original root segment spectra (in black). The green arrow indicates a shift in spectra shape due to soil contrast.

Conclusions

Root differentiation from soils
- The polarization range for various earth materials fall within 0.2-20 mrad
- The results suggest that root segments can be differentiated from soils based mainly on their stronger polarization response
- Modeling result show that the imaginary part of conductivity is more effective in capturing key properties of different soil-root scenarios e.g. root age and soil wetness.

Root properties
- Electrical response of roots depend mainly on their age and anatomy

Intra- and Inter-species variability
- Different plants of each species studied showed similar response with minor variations.
- Maize and Brachypodium roots showed unique electrical signature which is largely dependent on their anatomy

References

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