AGU ADVANCING EARTH AND SPACE SCIENCE

Geophysical Research Letters

RESEARCH LETTER
10.1029/2022GL101072

Key Points:

- High-speed cameras observation of upward bipolar flashes originated from the connection of recoil leaders (RL) with intracloud (IC) lightning
- Connection of RL with IC lightning
- Positive subsequent return stroke using the same channel of the upward positive leader

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Citation:
Cruz, I. T., Saba, M. M. F., Schumann, C., & Warner, T. A. (2022). Upward bipolar lightning flashes originated from the connection of recoil leaders with intracloud lightning. *Geophysical Research Letters*, *49*, e2022GL101072. https://doi.org/10.1029/2022GL101072

Received 1 SEP 2022
Accepted 31 OCT 2022

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Upward Bipolar Lightning Flashes Originated From the Connection of Recoil Leaders With Intracloud Lightning

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Abstract The present work shows high-speed videos of two upward flashes that started with positive upward leaders and, instead of being followed by negative subsequent return strokes, they were followed by positive subsequent return strokes. In both cases, after the positive leaders developed, recoil leaders (RL) appeared in their decayed branches as would be usual in negative upward lightning flashes. However, in these flashes the negative end of a recoil leader connected to a positive leader of an intracloud (IC) flash nearby. The connection initiated a downward positive leader that re-ionized the decayed channel of the upward flash all the way to the tower giving origin to a positive subsequent return stroke. This work shows that RL do play an important role in the occurrence of bipolar upward flashes and their interaction with IC flashes can provide explanations for all types of bipolar upward flashes initiated by upward positive leaders.

Plain Language Summary The increasing number of tall buildings and towers, and the rapid expansion of wind power generation, has also increased the concerns about damages caused by upward flashes. Although upward flashes are not the most common type of flashes in nature, they can pose a serious threat to tall structures. They are usually initiated by a positive upward leader that starts at the tip of the structure. After reaching cloud base, the discharge ends or is followed by a negative downward leader that strikes the tower and produces an intense negative discharge known as a return stroke. This common type of upward flash is named negative upward flash. The present work presents high-speed videos of a rare type of upward flash, the bipolar upward flash. In this flash, after the propagation of the positive upward leader, another positive leader retraces the same path traveled by the original upward leader, but in a downward manner resulting in a positive return stroke. The increased threat of damage caused by this rare flash is due to the intense positive return stroke and long duration current that frequently follows. This work explains how this, and other types of bipolar flashes are possible.

1. Introduction

Negative upward lightning originates at the tip of tall structures when the electric field exceeds a critical level (Schumann, 2016). A positive upward leader initiates from these structures and propagates toward the base of the thundercloud (Heidler et al., 2015; Saba et al., 2015, 2016; Schumann et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2013, 2016). After a while, their branches decay, producing recoil leaders (RL) (Mazur, 2016a; Mazur & Ruhnke, 1993, 2011; Mazur et al., 2013). Some of these RL develop toward the lightning initiation point at ground as dart leaders (Lu et al., 2008; Mazur & Ruhnke, 2011; Saba et al., 2016). When they reach the ground, the electric potential is transferred to the cloud causing a fast wave of luminosity moving upward, a phenomenon called a subsequent return stroke. Thus, positive upward leaders from ground structures are frequently followed by negative subsequent return strokes striking these structures. In this work, we show two cases of upward positive leaders that were followed by positive subsequent return strokes. Herein we argue that this is possible due to the interaction of RL with intracloud (IC) lightning.

The polarity of lightning is defined according to the net charge transferred to the ground. Negative upward lightning transfers negative net charge to ground. In the two cases observed by this work, the upward positive leader (negative charge transfer to ground) was followed by positive subsequent return strokes (positive charge transfer to ground), that is, there was a transfer of negative and positive charge during these events, characterizing the flashes as upward bipolar lightning flashes (Azadifar et al., 2016; Romero et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2018; Sunjerga et al., 2019; Wang & Takagi, 2008; Zhou et al., 2011). There are three types of bipolar lightning: Type 1—

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lightning that had a polarity change during the initial continuing current (ICC), representing 76.9% of the upward bipolar lightning flashes. Type 2—lightning with a given ICC followed by a subsequent return stroke of different polarity, corresponding to 15.4% and Type 3—lightning with subsequent return strokes of different polarities during the same event, corresponding to 7.7% of upward bipolar lightning flashes (Azadifar et al., 2016; Rakov & Uman, 2003).

A study published by Shi et al. (2018) showed three upward bipolar lightning flashes of Type 2 (same type as the ones presented in this paper), which occurred in winter storms in Japan. The authors, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon, proposed a scenario. They state that a bipolar floating channel would originate in a decayed branch of the upward lightning and its negative end, being close to a center of positive charges, would begin to propagate toward it while the positive end would develop toward the ground generating a positive subsequent return stroke. The proposed scenario for the physical processes involved in Type 2 events analyzed by Shi et al. (2018) differs from what was observed in this work. Shi et al. (2018) could not observe the role of RL in the formation of bipolar upward flashes but recommend that further studies could try to find it. In this work the analysis of high-speed videos of two upward flashes shows, as in a previous study about bipolar cloud-to-ground flashes (Saba et al., 2013), that RL can play an important role in the occurrence of bipolar upward flashes. Furthermore, in bipolar upward flashes, IC flashes are also involved and this interaction provides explanations not only for Type 2 bipolar upward flashes but also for Type 1 and 3.

2. Instrumentation

2.1. High-Speed Camera

The first upward lightning flash (UP 44) was filmed on 1 February 2013, at 19:58:41 Universal Time Coordinated (UTC), by a Phantom v310 high-speed camera (acquisition rate of 10,000 fps, exposure time of 100 μs, and image spatial resolution of 640 × 480 pixels). The second lightning flash (UP 76) occurred on 16 January 2014, 17:05:28 UTC, filmed by a Phantom v711 high-speed camera, which was configured to acquire 20,000 fps, with an exposure time of 50 μs, and a spatial resolution of 720 × 400 pixels. Both cameras (equipped with a 6.5 mm lens) were located at a distance of 5 km from the upward flashes initiated from two towers located on Jaragua peak, Sao Paulo, Brazil. For more details on high-speed cameras, on the location and heights of the towers and on characteristics of upward flashes from these towers see Saba et al. (2006), Warner et al. (2013), Saba et al. (2016), and Schumann et al. (2019).

2.2. Lightning Location Systems

Data from a lightning localization system (Earth Networks Lightning [ENL]) was used in this work to confirm the polarity and peak current of the subsequent return stroke of the analyzed lightning flash. For more information about the network see Liu and Heckman (2012), Marchand et al. (2019), and Zhu et al. (2022).

3. Data

3.1. Upward Lightning Flashes (UP 44 and UP 76)

The occurrence of positive cloud-to-ground lightning flashes (+CG) near the Jaragua Peak triggered upward positive leaders that initiated the upward lightning flashes UP 44 and UP 76. The +CGs that triggered UP 44 and UP 76 were at a distance from the tower of 21 and 31 km; and had an estimated peak current of 43 and 85 kA, respectively.

UP 44 was triggered by a negatively charged leader propagating over the tower during the continuing current that followed the return stroke of the +CG. UP 76 was triggered right after a +CG that transferred negative charge to the cloud base over the tower.

These are the most common triggering modes of upward leaders for the Jaragua Peak region according to a previous study of 72 cases of upward lightning (see Table 2 in Schumann et al., 2019). All upward leaders occurring from the towers in the region and reported in previous works had also positive polarity (see also Saba et al., 2016).

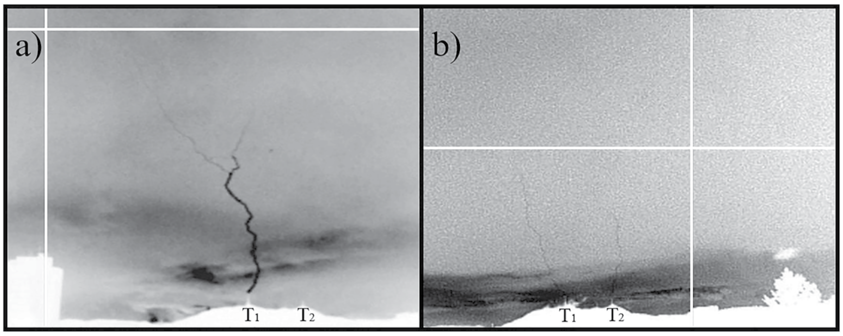

Figure 1. (a) Upward lightning UP 44; (b) upward lightning UP 76. The intersection of the horizontal and vertical white lines indicates the origin of the analyzed recoil leaders; the image was inverted and contrast enhanced to facilitate viewing.

The positive upward leaders had almost no branches but presented many RL during their propagation as is usually reported for positive leaders (see e.g., the works of Mazur (2002), Heidler et al. (2015), and Saba et al. (2008)).

In both upward flashes the connection of RL (present in the upward leader) with IC discharges resulted in positive subsequent return strokes striking the towers. The upward lightning flash UP 44 (Figure 1a) was initiated at the highest telecommunication tower of the Jaragua peak (T_1). It produced an ICC with duration longer than 142 ms (the initiation of the positive upward leader was not recorded due to late video triggering; therefore, the duration of the ICC which is determined by the high-speed camera videos is an underestimate). The positive upward leader developed toward the cloud base and after a while the lightning channel decayed, and several RL started to occur.

The upward flash UP 76 initiated with two positive upward leaders from towers T_1 and T_2 of the Jaragua peak. The leader from T_1 originated first, and after 1.7 ms the positive leader from T_2 emerged. After an ICC that lasted 157 ms, several RL appeared on the decayed positive upward leaders. The RL that will be analyzed in the following section was originated in the channel of upward leader initiated on T_2.

3.2. Positive Subsequent Return Stroke Observed in Upward Lightning Flash UP 44

Figure 2a shows a RL that starts along the decayed channel formed by the positive upward leader (time $t = 0$ μs). In the upper right corner of this video image, the development of a positive leader of an IC can also be observed. The negative end of the RL (blue arrow) propagates along the previously formed channel and then up along the right branch to connect to the IC positive leader (red-border arrow—Figure 2b). In Figure 2c, after connection, the positive leader re-ionizes the main channel of upward lightning flash and strikes the tower, producing a positive subsequent return stroke (Figure 2d). The peak current estimated by ENL was 83.9 kA. This subsequent return stroke was accompanied by a long continuing current, lasting 406 ms. Note that this combination of high peak current return stroke followed by a very long continuing current is very rare (see e.g., Figure 7 in Saba et al., 2010). The tower facility had power failure for several hours and some equipment damaged by this discharge.

3.3. Positive Subsequent Return Stroke Observed in Upward Lightning Flash UP 76

The upward lightning flash UP 76 had two upward leaders originating on towers T_1 and T_2 (Figure 1b). The positive subsequent return stroke took place along the path traced by the upward leader that started on T_2. It also began with the interaction of a RL with an IC flash (Figure 3).

Figure 3a shows the origin of the recoil leader (time $t = 0$ μs) and Figure 3b shows the development of RL that happens along a decayed branch of the upward lightning flash. The negative end (blue arrow) of the RL connects with the IC discharge and positive charges (red-border arrow) begin to flow through the channel created by the connection (Figure 3c). The positive leader strikes T_2 generating a positive subsequent return stroke with estimated peak current of 24.2 kA (Figure 3d). After the positive subsequent return stroke, a long continuing current flow for about 227 ms.

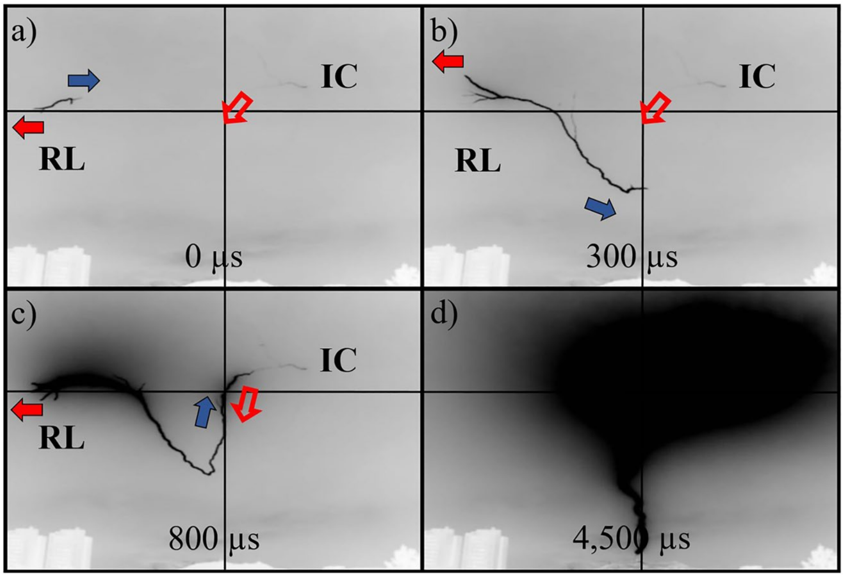

Figure 2. Propagation of a recoil leaders (RL) toward an intracloud (IC) discharge (a–c), and the resulting positive subsequent return stroke. The intersection between the horizontal and vertical **black** lines shows the connection region. The red-border arrow shows the development of the IC positive leader, the blue and red arrows represent the negative and positive end of the RL, respectively.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In both upward flashes, the negative end of RL originated in the decayed branches of the positive upward leader connected to the positive leader of an IC discharge. These IC discharges appear in the video only 130 (UP 44) and 48 ms (UP 76) after the occurrence of the +CG flashes. Despite these large time intervals, the IC discharges may be linked to the previous triggering +CG flashes as positive discharges to ground often involve long, horizontal channels, up to several tens of kilometers in length (Fuquay, 1982; Kong et al., 2008; Saba et al., 2008, 2009).

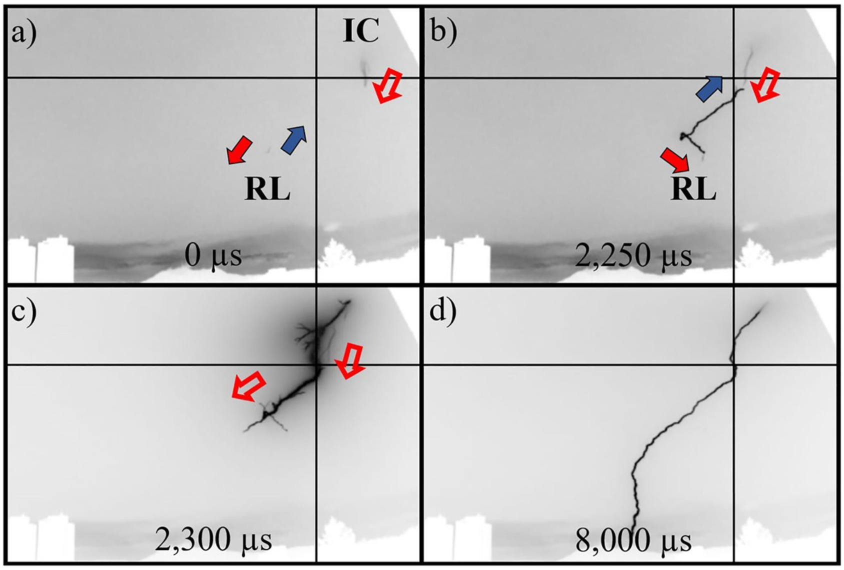

Figure 3. Propagation of a recoil leaders (RL) initiated on a decayed branch of the positive upward leader toward an intracloud (IC) discharge. They connect and start a positive subsequent return stroke that hits T_2. The intersection of the horizontal and vertical black lines in the images shows the connection location. The red-border arrow in the image represents the positive leader of the IC discharge. The negative and positive ends of the RL are indicated by blue and red arrows, respectively.

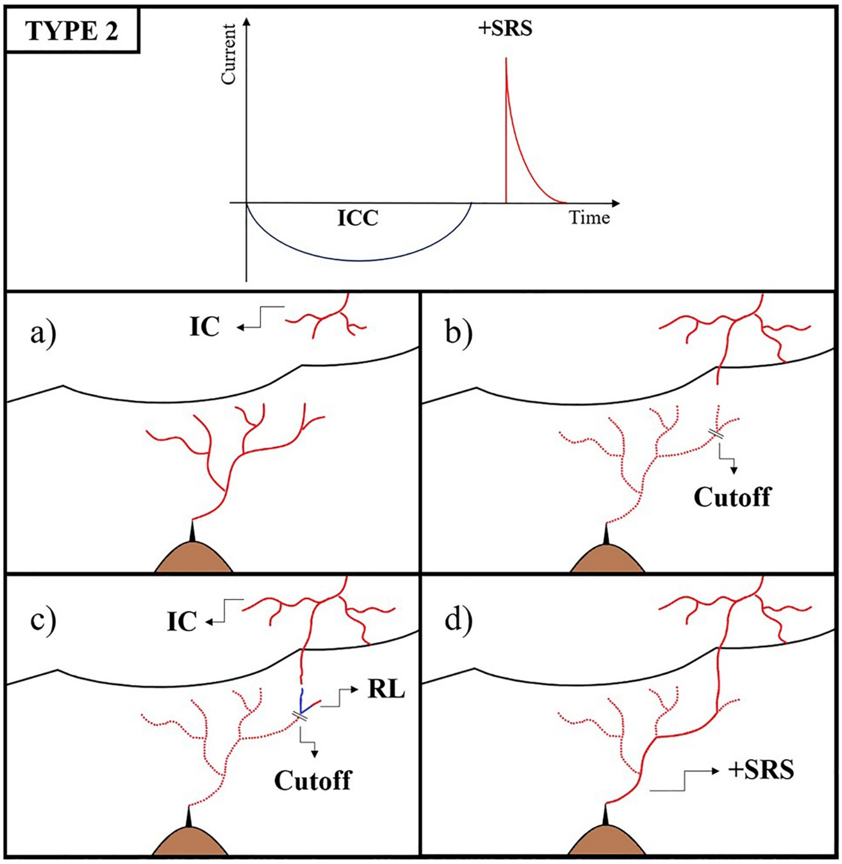

Figure 4. Schematic representation of the origin of Type 2 bipolar upward flashes caused by the interaction of recoil leaders with intracloud discharges.

After the connection of the negative end of the RL, positive charges flow toward the origin of the upward flashes, starting positive subsequent return strokes with long continuing currents (Figures 2 and 3).

These two flashes are Type 2 upward bipolar lightning flashes, that is, ICC followed by subsequent return stroke of opposite polarity. Figure 4 shows a schematic representation of how these discharges originate. In Figure 4a, it is possible to observe the positive leader of the upward lightning and the IC discharge (the black solid lines in Figures 4a–4d represent the cloud base). After a few tens of milliseconds, the current from the channel of the upward flash decays and cutoff occurs. This is inferred from the fact that the negative end of RL cannot follow the channel that leads to the tower. This cutoff must have happened somewhere in the channel, close to the place indicated in Figure 4b (see Mazur (2016b) and Mazur & Ruhnke (2014) for more information on current cutoff). Then, in Figure 4c, a RL appears in the decayed channel and the negative end (blue trace) of the RL propagates toward the positive leader of the IC flash. In Figure 4d, the negative end of the RL connects with the IC and positive charges flow toward ground giving origin to a positive subsequent return stroke (+SRS).

Based on what was observed in UP 44 and UP 76 by the high-speed videos, possible scenarios are presented in Figures 5 and 6 suggesting how the interaction of RL with IC discharges could explain the origin of Type 1 and 3 upward bipolar lightning flashes.

Figure 5 shows a possible scenario for Type 1 bipolar upward lightning flashes (polarity change during the ICC). In Figure 5a, it is possible to observe the positive leader of the upward lightning and the IC discharge. After a few milliseconds (Figure 5b) there is a current cutoff in one of the branches of the upward flash. In Figure 5c, a RL appears in the decayed channel of the disconnected branch and the negative end of the RL propagates toward the IC discharge. In Figure 5d, the negative end of the RL connects with the positive leader of the IC discharge and

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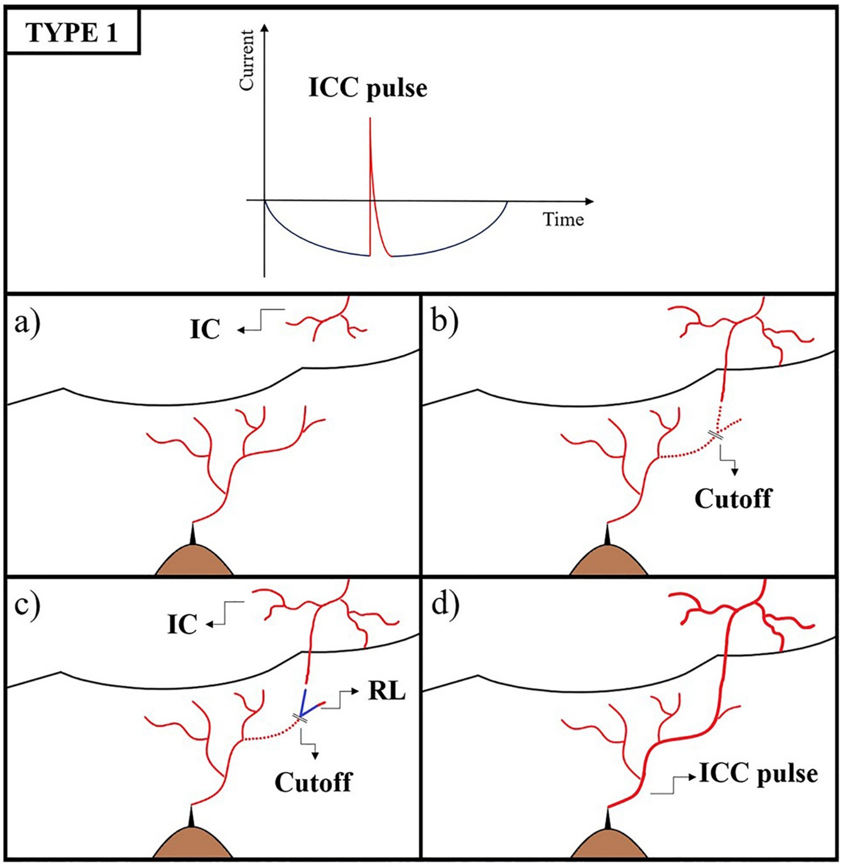

Figure 5. Schematic representation of the origin of bipolar upward lightning flashes of Type 1 caused by the interaction of recoil leaders with intracloud discharge.

positive charges flow toward the ground originating a brief ICC pulse of opposite polarity. If the positive upward leaders (show in Figure 5a) continue to propagate, the ICC current returns to the original polarity (negative net charge transfer to the ground) as is depicted on the current plot on top of Figure 5.

Finally, Figure 6 shows the schematic representation of how a Type 3 bipolar upward lightning flash (subsequent return stroke of different polarities during the same event) could happen. Figure 6a shows the positive leader of the upward lightning and the IC discharge. Figure 6b shows the cutoff of the current and the RL that connects with the IC discharge (Figure 6c). After connection, positive charges flow giving origin to a +SRS. This sequence is equal to the one followed by Type 2 upward bipolar flash described before (Figure 4). After the +SRS, if a RL happens along another upward positive leader branch a −SRS may occur as in a common negative upward lightning flash (Figure 6d).

In summary, this work reports two Type 2 bipolar upward flashes observed by high-speed cameras. Through the above analysis it is shown that the connection of RL with IC positive leaders results in positive subsequent return strokes striking the towers. The increased threat of damage caused by this rare flash is due to the intense positive return stroke and long duration current that frequently follows. Based on the observed interactions between RL and IC flashes we suggested two possible scenarios that could also explain bipolar upward lightning flashes of Type 1 and 3.

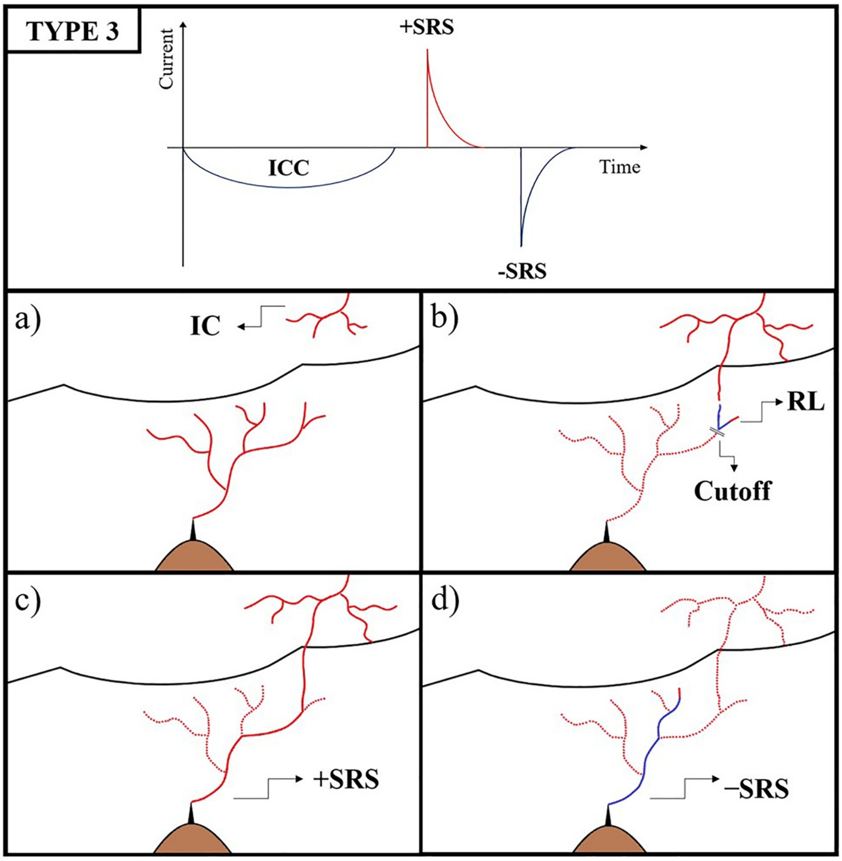

Figure 6. Schematic representation of the origin of bipolar upward lightning flashes of Type 3 caused by the interaction of recoil leaders with intracloud discharges.

Data Availability Statement

The high-speed videos (UP 44 and UP 76) analyzed in this work are available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7271847.

Acknowledgments
This research has been supported by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), by Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq), and by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP) through projects 88887.676681/2022-00 (CAPES), 130928/2020-8, 310288/2021-5 (CNPq) and 2012/15375-7, 2013/05784-0 (FAPESP). The authors would like to give sincere thanks to Lie Liong Lee (Benny), Raphael Guedes, and Guilherme Aminger, for their assistance in obtaining the high-speed camera data used for this research. Finally, would like to thank Jeff Lapierre for sharing lightning localization system data (courtesy from ENL).

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