

A Temperature-Compensated BLE Beacon and 802.15.4-to-BLE Translator on a Crystal-Free Mote

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Abstract—Crystal-free radios have the potential to revolutionize the IoT: due to their single-chip nature, they are both very cheap (no external components required) and very small (the size of a grain of rice). The Single-Chip Micro Mote (SC μ M) is a $2\times 3\times 0.3$ mm³ crystal-free chip that can communicate with off-the-shelf transceivers over Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) or IEEE 802.15.4. Setting its communication frequency is challenging because the crystal-free chip can rely only on internal oscillating circuits, which are very susceptible to temperature. Without compensation, a SC μ M chip can no longer communicate with an off-the-shelf BLE receiver if the temperature changes by more than 1.25 °C. This paper introduces a two-step temperature compensation method, allowing SC μ M to successfully send BLE frames over a 20 °C temperature range. After performing initial calibration during optical bootloading, we use an open-loop linear model to estimate the ambient temperature and continuously tune the mote’s local oscillator (LO) frequency as the temperature changes. We show how the mote can use the intermediate frequency of 802.15.4 frames it receives from nearby off-the-shelf transceivers as a frequency reference to adjust its LO frequency. This compensation method enables SC μ M to operate as a tiny BLE beacon, a BLE temperature sensor (for retail or medical applications), or a 802.15.4-to-BLE translation device.

Keywords—Internet of Things, crystal-free radio, temperature compensation, wireless temperature sensor.

I. INTRODUCTION

The single-chip micro mote (SC μ M) [1] is the first crystal-free chip to be compatible with the Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) and IEEE 802.15.4 standards, allowing it to interact with off-the-shelf hardware. The $2\times 3\times 0.3$ mm³ chip requires just three connections for operation: power, ground, and antenna. The main challenge of crystal-free architectures is that they must rely entirely on internal oscillating circuits for timekeeping and frequency selection. These oscillators are subject to large temperature coefficients, e.g., -40 ppm/°C for SC μ M’s local oscillator (LO) [2].

A growing number of studies focuses on software approaches to compensate for this drift and keep crystal-free motes functional over a wide temperature range. Using SC μ M, Suci \acute{u} *et al.* track the intermediate frequency (IF) of incoming 802.15.4 frames and use a recursive least-squares model to predict the tuning code based on temperature [3], [4]. Elsts *et al.* use a lookup table built from initial calibration and compensation history to calculate the required clock compensation in channel-hopping networks [5]. Song *et al.*

use both a lookup table and phase-tracking of incoming frames to achieve a carrier stability better than ± 100 ppm on their crystal-free 3.5×3.8 mm² MICS transceiver [6]. Chang *et al.* propose the QuickCal routine in which 16 dedicated off-the-shelf 802.15.4 transceivers regularly send frames for SC μ M to receive and tune its frequency settings [7].

There have also been other approaches developed for crystal-based architectures. Martinez *et al.* apply quadratic least-squares to a periodically updated table of frequency drift measurements to build a drift-temperature model with a maximum drift of 10 ms over 24 h (close to 0.1 ppm) [8]. Lee *et al.* present a compensation circuit to program a 23-bit frequency divider based on measurements between -40 °C and 60 °C to achieve less than 1 ppm of frequency variation [9].

In this paper, we propose a method to allow SC μ M to communicate with off-the-shelf BLE and 802.15.4 devices over a 20 °C temperature range. This is challenging for two reasons. First, without compensation, SC μ M exceeds the maximum ± 50 ppm BLE frequency drift requirement with a ± 1.25 °C temperature change [10]. Second, due to its single-chip nature, SC μ M is not equipped with a dedicated temperature sensor. In Section III, we describe how we use a flashing infrared LED and the mote’s optical receiver to initialize the tuning parameters at a certain temperature. In Section IV, we apply the technique introduced in [11] to use the behavior of the on-chip oscillators’ frequencies over temperature to indirectly measure the temperature. We build an open-loop linear model that uses the temperature estimate to tune the LO frequency. This turns the mote into a stand-alone BLE temperature sensor and is the first time open-loop temperature compensation is applied to a crystal-free mote. In Section V, we turn SC μ M into an 802.15.4-to-BLE translator, simultaneously receiving 802.15.4 packets and transmitting the data as BLE packets. We use the IF of the incoming 802.15.4 packets to tune the BLE TX frequency around the bias temperature.

II. SINGLE-CHIP MICRO MOTE (SC μ M)

The Single-Chip Micro Mote (SC μ M) is a $2\times 3\times 0.3$ mm³ crystal-free chip capable of communicating with off-the-shelf hardware over BLE and 802.15.4. In order to operate without any attached wires, SC μ M uses an optical receiver to load firmware for its Arm Cortex-M0 to execute [12]. We use an infrared LED connected to a Teensy 3.6 microcontroller to generate the blink sequence that programs the mote.

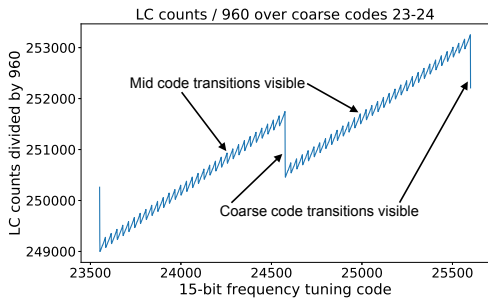


Fig. 1. $SC\mu M$'s LC frequency is not monotonic with respect to the 15-bit frequency tuning code: there is a drop in frequency at the `coarse` and `mid` code transitions when the 5-bit `mid` and `fine` codes roll over, respectively. The counts were measured every 100 ms.

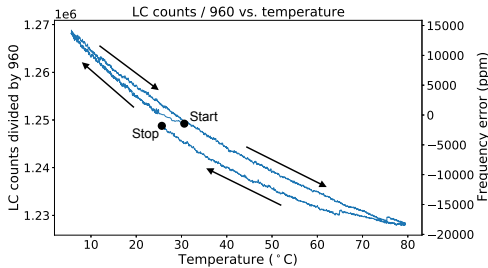


Fig. 2. The LC frequency for a given tuning code changes with temperature. Frequency is measured every 500 ms as $SC\mu M$ is heated up and then cooled down. The hysteresis (the offset between start and stop points) is caused by the thermal mass of the development board to which the crystal-free mote is wirebonded.

The local oscillator (LO) consists of a 2.4 GHz LC tank whose frequency can be digitally tuned using three 5-bit overlapping capacitive DACs, called the `coarse`, `mid`, and `fine` DACs. As shown in Fig. 1, the tuning characteristic is not monotonic to ensure that there are no missed frequencies in the tuning range. In the absence of temperature changes, the LC tank has a frequency stability better than ± 40 ppm [13]. The LC frequency changes with temperature, as shown in Fig. 2. Note that the temperature coefficient shown in Fig. 2 is larger than the one reported in [2] because of the drift of the on-chip oscillator used to trigger the measurements [14].

Our goal is for $SC\mu M$ to reliably transmit BLE advertising packets on channel 37 (2.402 GHz) to a smartphone. The BLE specifications define a data bit rate of 1 Mbps and a maximum frequency drift of ± 50 ppm [10]. We deal with the non-monotonicity of the LO frequency by only tuning the 5-bit `fine` DAC around a bias temperature; this allows for frequency compensation over a range of around 20 °C. We use the optical bootloading process to tune the `coarse` and `mid` codes at the bias temperature (Section III). To tune the `fine` code in the face of temperature variations, we either estimate the temperature and compensate for it (Section IV) or use incoming 802.15.4 frames as a frequency reference (Section V).

III. TUNING `COARSE` AND `MID` OPTICALLY

Immediately after the optical programming operation, we program the Teensy board to blink its infrared LED every

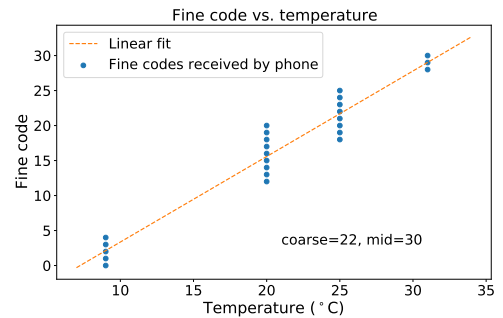


Fig. 3. The `fine` codes resulting in successful BLE packet reception on a smartphone at four temperatures and for a fixed `coarse` and `mid` code value.

100 ms for 15 s. The firmware that was previously loaded turns on the LC divider and calibrates the LC frequency by measuring the number of LC counts within each of the 100 ms periods. This one-time operation is sufficient to determine the `coarse` and `mid` tuning codes. Further tuning of the `fine` code (Sections IV and V) allows $SC\mu M$ to keep operating within a 20 °C range around the temperature at which optical calibration was done.

IV. TUNING `FINE` BY ESTIMATING TEMPERATURE

Using the `coarse` and `mid` codes from Section III, we vary the temperature across four values and have $SC\mu M$ transmit a BLE packet for each of the `fine` code settings at each temperature value. We record which `fine` code settings result in successful BLE packet reception on a smartphone that is using the Qualcomm Snapdragon 835 chipset. Fig. 3 shows how varying the 5-bit `fine` code while keeping `coarse` and `mid` constant allows $SC\mu M$ to keep communicating over a temperature range of around 20 °C. We note that the smartphone's BLE receiver allows for a frequency error of almost 400 kHz, considerably larger than the ± 50 ppm frequency requirement stipulated by the BLE specifications.

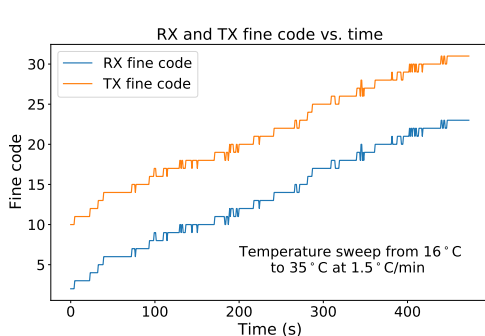
$SC\mu M$ is not equipped with a dedicated temperature sensor. Instead, $SC\mu M$ features a 2 MHz chipping clock and a 32 kHz sleep timer. The frequencies of these oscillators vary differently over temperature changes, but by characterizing these variations, $SC\mu M$ can determine the temperature between 0 °C and 100 °C with an accuracy of 2 °C [11].

We use this temperature estimate and a least-squares regression on the mean `fine` code received at each temperature from Fig. 3 to derive the temperature compensation. This relationship is expressed in (1) for a particular $SC\mu M$ chip.

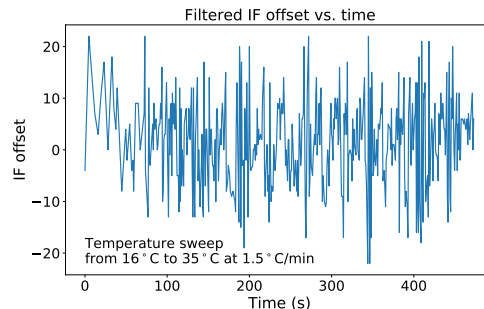
$$\text{fine code} = 1.2[1/^\circ\text{C}] \cdot \text{temperature}[^\circ\text{C}] - 18.4 \quad (1)$$

We experimentally verify this approach by placing the crystal-free mote into a temperature chamber, sweeping its temperature, and checking that a smartphone can still receive $SC\mu M$'s BLE packets across temperature. A screenshot of the smartphone's BLE sniffer application is shown in Fig. 4.

This frequency compensation method requires two calibrations over temperature for every chip: one to find the



(a) The TX fine code is adjusted by the same amount as the RX fine code to keep the filtered IF offset at 0.



(b) The corresponding filtered IF offset. An IF offset of 20 corresponds to around 40 ppm of deviation from the channel frequency.

Fig. 6. The mote's 802.15.4 RX and BLE TX fine codes and the corresponding filtered IF offset during a temperature sweep from 16 °C to 35 °C at a ramp rate of 1.5 °C/min. Both the fine codes and the filtered IF offset are recorded every 800 ms.

VI. CONCLUSION

Without an external frequency reference, the local oscillator (LO) of a crystal-free mote such as SC μ M is subject to a high temperature coefficient. Without compensation, if the temperature changes by more than 1.25 °C, the BLE packets sent by SC μ M are no longer within the frequency specifications.

This paper introduces a two-step compensation solution for SC μ M to successfully communicate to a BLE receiver over a range of 20 °C. We tune the coarse and mid frequency codes using optical frequency calibration and then tune the fine code through a combination of estimating the ambient temperature and tracking the IF of received 802.15.4 frames.

The methods presented in this paper allow SC μ M to be used as a BLE beacon or a 802.15.4-to-BLE translator. For example, a SC μ M chip can be embedded in wearables or assembled with a tiny coin cell battery onto the back of a flying insect as a tracker.

We are currently working on using SC μ M as a BLE beacon between 0 °C and 100 °C. We can generalize to a wider temperature range by determining the coarse and mid codes at multiple bias temperatures spaced 20 °C apart. When the temperature crosses into another 20 °C bin, we adjust the coarse and mid codes correspondingly, and within each 20 °C bin, we continue using the two fine code compensation methods described in this paper. The 2 MHz chipping clock used to clock the BLE TX FIFO at 1 MHz has a temperature coefficient of around 160 ppm/°C, for which we need to compensate as well [15].

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