

MULTIPLE LANGUAGE USER INTERFACE FOR THERMAL COMFORT CONTROLLER

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

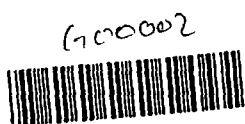
The present invention relates to thermostats and other thermal comfort controllers and particularly to a multiple language user interface for such thermal comfort controllers.

Current thermal comfort controllers, or thermostats, have a limited user interface which typically includes a number of data input buttons and a small display. Hereinafter, the term thermostat will be used to reference a general comfort control device and is not to be limiting in any way. For example, in addition to traditional thermostats, the present such control device could be a humidistat or used for venting control. As is well known, thermostats often have setback capabilities which involves a programmed temperature schedule. For example, a temperature schedule could be programmed so that in the winter months, a house is warmed to 72 degrees automatically at 6:00 a.m. when the family awakes, cools to 60 degrees during the day while the family is at work and at school, re-warms to 72 degrees at 4:00 p.m. and then cools a final time to 60 degrees after 11:00 p.m., while the family is sleeping. Such a schedule of lower temperatures during off-peak hours saves energy costs.

A schedule of set back temperatures is one example of a control algorithm that can be used by the comfort controller. Of course, such control algorithms will be different for different climates. The control algorithms also vary based on personal preferences. Some people like their homes warmer in the winter than other people do.

Programmable comfort controllers have been troublesome in the past because users often do not understand how to correctly program the controllers. For people whose first language is not English, or for people travelling to a foreign country and staying in a hotel or other housing, programming comfort controllers can be even more difficult because the buttons, controls, and displays on the controllers are usually labeled with English words.

What is needed in the art is a user interface for a thermostat in which the temperature schedule is more easily programmed. To make the programming easier, users should be able



to choose a preferred language and then view the switches, etc. on the comfort controller in the chosen preferred language. In addition, to make programming and using the controllers easier, different control algorithms should be available to the user to choose from. The different control algorithms might be programmed during manufacturing, or loaded over the Internet or other network after installation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

This invention can be regarded as a multiple language user interface system for thermal comfort controllers. The user interface system includes a central processing unit, a memory, a display with a touch-sensitive screen used for input, and a language selector. Some embodiments also include a network interface. The memory can store at least one control algorithm and at least one user interface object. The language selector is used to choose a preferred language. Once a preferred language is chosen, the display unit uses the user interface objects in the memory that match the preferred language. In this way, the controls, labels, etc. that are presented to the user on the display unit are in the user's preferred language. In one embodiment, when the comfort controller is first powered-up after installation, the user may be asked to select the preferred language and then the user interface objects may be loaded. In some embodiments, the user interface objects are loaded from the Internet. Control algorithms may also be loaded so that the user can choose from one that is suited for the user's climate and personal preferences.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a block diagram of a user interface system for a thermal comfort controller, in accordance with the present invention.

Figure 2 is a perspective view of the user interface system in an embodiment with a stylus, in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is a multiple language user interface system for a thermostat or other comfort controller. Throughout the drawings, an attempt has been made to label corresponding elements with the same reference numbers. The reference numbers include:

Reference Number	Description
100	Central Processing Unit
200	Display Unit
300	Memory
400	User Interface Object(s)
500	Control Algorithm(s)
600	Initial Interface Object(s)
700	Stylus
800	Conduits to Heating/Cooling Devices, Thermostat, etc.
905	Additional Controls
910	Other Data
915	Buttons
920	Labels
950	Network Interface

Referring to the drawings, Figure 1 is a block diagram of one embodiment of the user interface system for a comfort controller. The user interface system includes a central processing unit 100. This central processing unit 100 is coupled to a display unit 200, a network interface 950, and a memory 300. The display unit 200 has a touch-sensitive screen which allows the user to input data without the need for a keyboard or mouse. The memory 300 can store one or more user interface objects 400 and one or more control algorithms 500. In some embodiments, the memory 300 can also store one or more initial interface objects 600. The user interface system also has conduits 800 to the heating/cooling devices or thermostats thereof so that user interface system can communicate with the thermostat or other comfort controller.

The display unit 200 includes a graphical display/touch sensitive screen. This configuration provides for very flexible graphical display of information along with a very

user friendly data input mechanism. The display unit 200 may be very similar to the touch screen display used in a hand-held personal digital assistant ("PDA"), such as a Palm brand PDA manufactured by 3Com, a Jornada brand PDA manufactured by Hewlett Packard, etc. Of course the graphical user interface system could also be manufactured to be integrated with a thermostat itself. In such an embodiment, a touch-sensitive LCD display is coupled with the thermostat's existing central processing unit and RAM.

The control algorithms 500 are programmed or selected by the user. One such control algorithm 500 would be a set-point schedule containing a list of times associated to a list of temperatures. The thermal controller sets-up or sets-back the temperature according to such a set-point schedule. For example, a set-point schedule could be configured to adjust the temperature to 60 degrees at 6:00 a.m., then to 67 degrees at 6:30 a.m., and up to 73 degrees at 8:00 a.m., etc.

Figure 2 shows a perspective view of one possible embodiment of the user interface system with a stylus 700. In Figure 2, the user interface system has been installed as an integral element of the thermostat wall unit. The display unit 200 of the user interface system displays the graphical representation of the set-point temperature schedule. These graphical representations are presented as a graph in which one axis denotes time and the other axis denotes temperatures. The graph is labeled 920. Other data 910 is also displayed, including the time and temperature. Of course, other data could also be displayed, such as the current date, day of the week, indoor and/or outdoor relative humidity, etc.

The display unit 200 can also be configured with additional controls 905, which could, for example, switch the display between Fahrenheit and Celsius for the temperature, between standard and military time, and between showing a single day's schedule versus showing a week's schedule. The additional controls 905 are labeled. In Figure 2, there is a control to review the schedules, one to program new schedules, and one to manually control the heating or cooling of the house. In addition to the additional controls 905 programmed and displayed on display unit 200, physical buttons 915 of the thermostat could be programmed to be used for working with the user interface system as well. This is similar to the operation of a PDA.

There is also an additional control 905 in Figure 2 which allows the user to select a preferred language. Once a preferred language is chosen, the display unit uses user interface objects 400 in the memory to correctly display all of the textual information in the preferred language. For example, in Figure 2, if a language other than English was chosen, the additional controls 905, the display information 910, and the labels 920 would be redisplayed in the chosen language. This makes the comfort controller easier to use by someone for whom English is not his or her first language.

In one embodiment of the invention, the comfort controller would be installed without any user interface objects, initial interface objects, or control algorithms stored in memory.

When first powered-up after installation, the comfort controller is programmed to load the initial interface objects 600 via the network interface 950. For example, the comfort controller could retrieve the initial interface objects 600 from a web page on the Internet. Or the comfort controller's network interface 950 could include a modem connected to a phone line. In such an embodiment, the initial interface objects 600 can be downloaded as files.

The initial interface objects 600 are presented on the display unit 200 and request the user to choose a preferred language. Once the preferred language is chosen, the proper user interface objects 400 are then downloaded. In another embodiment, the comfort controller can be connected via the network interface 950 to a PDA, laptop computer, or similar device carried by the comfort controller installer. The installer's PDA or computer can have libraries of control algorithms, initial interface objects, and user interface objects accessible from memory which can be transferred by a cable, infra-red port, radio-frequency port or other communication method.

Of course, because memory is now so economical some embodiments of the current invention are shipped from the manufacturer with the initial interface objects and many language versions of the user interface objects 400 already stored in memory 300. If enough languages are stored in memory 300, the network interface 950 is not necessary. Otherwise, it is only necessary if the preferred language is one that does not already have user interface objects 400 in memory 300.

Likewise, some embodiments are shipped with control algorithms 500 already stored in memory. The user can pick and choose from these algorithms or can choose to download updated or additional control algorithms 500 via the network interface 950.

The graphical representations, controls and other data that are displayed on display unit 200 are managed by a computer program stored in memory 300. The computer program could be written in any computer language. Possible computer languages to use include C, Java, and Visual Basic.

5 There are many ways in which the user interface system can work with the thermal comfort controller. The user interface system would probably be integrated into a thermal comfort control system and installed on a wall much like current programmable thermostats. However, if the user interface system is configured on a hand-held PDA, the user-interface could communicate with the thermal comfort controller via the PDA's infra-red sensor. Or,
10 the PDA could be synchronized with a personal computer and the personal computer could set the appropriate instructions to the thermal comfort controller. Or, the PDA could use a cellular/mobile phone feature to telephone the controller (i.e., thermostat, personal computer, etc.) to exchange pertinent and relevant data.

15 From the foregoing detailed description, it will be evident that there are a number of changes, adaptations and modifications of the present invention which come within the province of those skilled in the art. However, it is intended that all such variations not departing from the spirit of the invention be considered as within the scope thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. A user interface system for a programmable comfort controller, comprising:

a central processing unit;

a memory capable of storing at least one user interface object and at least one control algorithm,
5 the memory coupled to the central processing unit;

a display unit with a touch-sensitive screen, coupled to the central processing unit, for
graphically displaying the user interface objects and for allowing a user to program the
control algorithms; and

a language selector which allows a preferred language of a user to be selected, so that the display
10 unit can display the user interface objects that are in the preferred language.

2. The user interface system of claim 1, further comprising a network interface for
connecting to a network, the network interface coupled to the central processing unit.

15 3. The user interface system of claim 1, further comprising at least one initial interface
object, stored in the memory, the initial interface objects used by the language selector in
allowing the preferred language to be selected.

4. The user interface system of claim 2, wherein the network interface connects the user
20 interface system to the Internet.

5. The user interface system of claim 2, wherein the network interface connects the user
interface system to a telephony network.

6. The user interface system of claim 2, wherein the network interface connects the user interface system to a cellular telephony network.

5 7. The user interface system of claim 2, wherein the network interface uses infra-red coupling to connect the user interface system to the network.

8. The user interface system of claim 2, wherein the network interface uses radio frequency coupling to connect the user interface system to the network.

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9. A method for programming a thermal comfort controller with a user interface system having a central processing unit, a memory capable of storing at least one user interface object and at least one control algorithm, a display unit with a touch-sensitive screen for graphically displaying the user interface objects and for allowing a user to program the control algorithms,
15 and a language selector which allows a preferred language of a user to be selected so that the display unit can display the user interface objects that are in the preferred language, wherein the memory, the language selector and the display unit are coupled to the central processing unit, the method comprising:

loading at least one initial interface object into the memory, for use by the language selector;

20 displaying the initial interface objects to request the user to choose a language;

selecting a preferred language with the language selector; and

loading at least one user interface object into the memory, for use by the display unit in displaying user interface objects that are in the preferred language.

10. The method for programming a thermal comfort controller from claim 9, further comprising loading at least one control algorithm into the memory.

11. The method for programming a thermal comfort controller from claim 9, wherein the step
5 of loading at least one initial interface object is initiated when the thermal comfort controller is first powered-up after being installed.

12. The method for programming a thermal comfort controller from claim 9, wherein the step of loading at least one user interface object into the memory accesses the Internet.

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13. An interactive display unit, comprising:

a central processing unit;

a memory capable of storing at least one user interface object and at least one control algorithm,
the memory coupled to the central processing unit;

15 a display unit with a touch-sensitive screen, coupled to the central processing unit, for graphically displaying the user interface objects and for allowing a user to program the control algorithms; and

a language selector which allows a preferred language of a user to be selected, so that the display unit can display the user interface objects that are in the preferred language.

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