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Inventor(s)	Haubrich; Gregory John et al.

Radio frequency MEMS devices for improved wireless performance for hearing assistance devices

Abstract

Disclosed herein, among other things, are methods and apparatus for wireless electronics using a MEMS switch for a hearing assistance device. The present application relates to a hearing assistance device configured to be worn by a wearer. The hearing assistance device includes a housing for electronics of the hearing assistance device, including wireless electronics. The wireless electronics include a plurality of radio frequency (RF) MEMS switches, in various embodiments. A hearing assistance processor is adapted to process signals for the wearer of the hearing assistance device. In various embodiments, the hearing assistance device includes an antenna, and a switchable capacitor bank configured for tuning the antenna, the switchable capacitor bank including one or more of the plurality of RF MEMS switches. The plurality of RF MEMS switches include an electrostatically deformed RF MEMS membrane, in an embodiment. Different configurations and approaches are provided.

Inventors: Haubrich; Gregory John (Champlin, MN), Solum; Jeffrey Paul (Greenwood, MN)

Applicant: Starkey Laboratories, Inc. (Eden Prairie, MN)

Family ID: 54323134

Assignee: Starkey Laboratories, Inc. (Eden Prairie, MN)

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Primary Examiner: Ni; Suhan

Attorney, Agent or Firm: Schwegman Lundberg & Woessner, P.A.

Background/Summary

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS (1) This application is a continuation of U.S. Ser. No. 16/557,510, filed Aug. 30, 2019, which is a continuation of U.S. Ser. No. 15/977,372, filed May 11, 2018, now issued as U.S. Pat. No. 10,405,110, which is a continuation of U.S. Ser. No. 14/751,691, filed Jun. 26, 2015, now issued as U.S. Pat. No. 9,986,347, which is a continuation-in-part under 37 C.F.R. 1.53(b) of U.S. Ser. No. 12/569,567 filed Sep. 29, 2009, which applications are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

(1) The present subject matter relates generally to hearing assistance devices, including, but not limited to hearing aids, and in particular to radio frequency MEMS devices for improved wireless performance for hearing assistance devices.

BACKGROUND

(2) Modern hearing assistance devices typically include digital electronics to enhance the wearer's experience. In the specific case of hearing aids, current designs employ digital signal processors rich in features. Their functionality is further benefited from communications, either from a remote source or from ear-to-ear for advanced processing. Thus, it is desirable to add wireless functionality to a hearing instrument to allow for functions such as ear-to-ear communications, wireless programming, wireless configuration, data logging, remote control, streaming audio, and bi-directional audio.

(3) Frequencies available for use, such as the ISM frequencies at 900 MHz and 2.4 GHz, offer a large amount of bandwidth and allow sufficient RF power to cover many of the functions shown above. However these ISM frequencies are crowded with relatively high power interferers of

various types. The radio in a hearing aid typically is a low power device that can run off of a very small low power battery. The challenge is to build a sensitive receiver with good linearity with minimal voltage and current. The radio and its support components typically are small and occupy as little volume as possible. Typically a radio transceiver in the 900 MHz band will require a frequency stable reference oscillator usually involving a quartz crystal as its resonating element. These devices are relatively large and need mechanical stability and special packaging.

(4) What is needed in the art is a compact system for reliable, low power communications in a hearing assistance device. The system should be useable in environments with radio frequency interference.

SUMMARY

(5) Disclosed herein, among other things, are methods and apparatus for hearing assistance devices, including, but not limited to hearing aids, and in particular to radio frequency MEMS devices for improved wireless performance for hearing assistance devices.

(6) The present subject matter relates to a hearing assistance device configured to be worn by a wearer. The hearing assistance device includes a housing for electronics of the hearing assistance device, including wireless electronics. The wireless electronics include a plurality of radio frequency (RF) MEMS switches, in various embodiments. A hearing assistance processor is adapted to process signals for the wearer of the hearing assistance device. In various embodiments, the hearing assistance device includes an antenna, and a switchable capacitor bank configured for tuning the antenna, the switchable capacitor bank including one or more of the plurality of RF MEMS switches. The plurality of RF MEMS switches includes an electrostatically deformed RF MEMS membrane acting as a variable capacitor, in an embodiment. Different configurations and approaches are provided.

(7) This Summary is an overview of some of the teachings of the present application and not intended to be an exclusive or exhaustive treatment of the present subject matter. Further details about the present subject matter are found in the detailed description and appended claims. The scope of the present invention is defined by the appended claims and their legal equivalents.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

(1) FIG. 1 shows a hearing assistance device including wireless electronics using a MEMS device, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

(2) FIG. 2 shows a block diagram of a system including a receiver and an antenna, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

(3) FIG. 3 shows a block diagram of a system including a radio and an antenna, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

(4) FIG. 4 shows a block diagram of a system including a radio and an antenna, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

(5) FIG. 5 shows a plurality of different communications that can be supported, according to various embodiments of the present subject matter.

(6) FIG. 6 shows an example of a receiver using MEMS components, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

(7) FIG. 7 shows an example of a receiver using MEMS components, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

(8) The following detailed description of the present subject matter refers to subject matter in the accompanying drawings which show, by way of illustration, specific aspects and embodiments in which the present subject matter may be practiced. These embodiments are described in sufficient

detail to enable those skilled in the art to practice the present subject matter. References to “an”, “one”, or “various” embodiments in this disclosure are not necessarily to the same embodiment, and such references contemplate more than one embodiment. The following detailed description is demonstrative and not to be taken in a limiting sense. The scope of the present subject matter is defined by the appended claims, along with the full scope of legal equivalents to which such claims are entitled.

(9) The present subject matter relates generally to hearing assistance devices, including, but not limited to hearing aids, and in particular to radios using a micro-electro-mechanical system (MEMS) device for hearing assistance device applications.

(10) Radio frequency (RF) transceiver design in hearing assistance devices can be better achieved using RF MEMS technology. RF MEMS devices, such as switches, provide for smaller size components and lower current drain for RF transceivers. Current transceiver integrated circuit (IC) technology involves large external surface acoustic wave (SAW) filters, and higher supply current and power to achieve proper RF receiver selectivity, dynamic range and noise. In some cases, no transmit/receive switches are used which decreases effective antenna efficiency due to losses of the inactive circuitry in parallel with the antenna. Additionally, tunable capacitor banks of metal-insulator-metal (MIM) capacitors utilize on-chip CMOS switches which have significant loss resistance which reduces antenna performance, receiver sensitivity and transmitter RF power output.

(11) The present subject matter provides for RF MEMS switches, tunable RF MEMS capacitors, and tunable RF MEMS resonators. In various embodiments, the RF MEMS devices or resonators are tunable, such that changes the electrostatic coupling tunes the MEMS, rather than relying completely on switching of elements in or out of the circuit. In various embodiments, RF MEMS switches can be used for low loss transmit/receive switches. RF MEMS switches can be used as switches in on-chip capacitor banks, in various embodiments. These improvements provide the benefits of lower loss, higher Q, more transmission power, and increased receiver sensitivity. In addition, RF MEMS switches can be used to implement the multiple filters and resonators for switching in and out the MEMS resonator used in the transceiver below. Additionally, the MEMS resonators, and thus the filters, may be directly tuned by adjusting the electrostatic voltage applied to the resonators. Thus, among other things the present subject matter provides for reduction in losses, lower cost, and higher performance in RF transceiver designs. In various embodiments, the MEMS resonator includes a wine-glass shaped resonator or a disc-shaped resonator. The MEMS resonator can include an aluminum-nitride resonator which is piezoelectric and does not require a static DC bias, and transduction to the MEMS or electrostatic biasing, according to various embodiments. In various embodiments, the RF MEMS resonator includes one or more of an RF pre-selector, RF filter, image filter, IF filter, VCO tank circuit, or part of an impedance matching circuit.

(12) In various embodiments, the present subject matter includes a switchable capacitor bank for antenna tuning, providing substantially lower loss than present on-chip solutions. The present subject matter includes high-Q tuning of VCOs used in UHF frequency synthesizers, in various embodiments. This high-Q tuning via either, or a combination of, RF MEMS variable capacitors, tunable resonators, and switchable tuning elements, provides for improved single-side-band phase-noise performance and frequency band selection. In one embodiment, a variable RF MEMS capacitor includes an electrostatically deformed RF MEMS membrane suspended at the periphery of an antenna of the device. In another embodiment, the deformed RF MEMS membrane is suspended at one end of the antenna for a beam-type device. The present subject matter provides increased performance (RF output, receiver selectivity, and receiver sensitivity) at a lower electrical current, in various embodiments. Various embodiments include a switchable capacitor bank configured for tuning the antenna, such as a (MEMS) switchable capacitor bank. Alternately, or additionally, this may include one or more of the plurality of tunable RF MEMS capacitors. The

present subject matter uses MEMS switches to switch a fixed shunt capacitor bank(s), in various embodiments. Various embodiments switch in various RF impedance matching elements, including but not limited to: capacitors, inductors, (MEMS) resonators, or various transmission line lengths. These elements could be switched in series, or shunt, or could even multiplex in individual matching circuit blocks.

(13) FIG. 1 shows a hearing assistance device including wireless electronics using a MEMS device, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. Hearing assistance device **100** includes a processor **110** and wireless electronics **120** including a micro-electro-mechanical system (MEMS) device. In various embodiments, the MEMS device includes a MEMS filter. In various embodiments, the MEMS device includes a MEMS resonator. Other MEMS devices for the wireless electronics **120** may be used without departing from the scope of the present subject matter. In various embodiments, the processor **110** and wireless electronics **120** are integrated into a single integrated circuit.

(14) The electronics are powered at least in part by battery **140**. In various embodiments, the hearing assistance device **100** includes a microphone **150** and a speaker, also known as a receiver, **160**. In hearing aid applications, the processor is adapted to receive sound signals from the microphone **150** and processed to provide adjustable gain to offset hearing loss of the wearer of the hearing aid. In various embodiments, signals received by the wireless electronics **120** can be processed if desired, including the ability for the wireless transceiver of the hearing assistance device to receive or transmit digitized, encoded audio streams, commands and statuses.

(15) In hearing aid applications, in various embodiments the processor **110** includes a digital signal processor in communication with the wireless electronics **120** to perform communications. In various embodiments, the processor and wireless electronics are adapted to perform communications as set forth herein.

(16) FIG. 2 shows a block diagram of a system **200** including a receiver **220** and an antenna **230**, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. The front end of the receiver **222** includes a filter bank **221** including one or more MEMS devices. In various embodiments, the filter bank **221** includes a plurality of MEMS filters. In various embodiments, the front end filter bank serves as a front end preselector filter for one or more radio frequency channels of interest. Such embodiments have an advantage in that they mitigate interference in the ISM band. In various embodiments a channel bank of MEMS filters is used in a receiver front end. Such embodiments address the limited linearity of low noise amplifiers and mixers in low power radio designs. Overload due to out of band signals is limited and further filtering may not be necessary. Phase noise requirements of the local oscillator are relaxed due to the absence of reciprocal mixing of out of band signals. Image rejection is achieved through the use of these front end MEMS filters and/or MEMS filters after a low-noise amplifier (LNA). Since the phase noise requirements are significantly reduced, the local oscillator may be realized using a MEMS resonator with less stringent phase noise requirements. Alternately, MEMS resonators with very high-Q may have extremely good phase-noise requirements, depending on the Q of the resonator. In various embodiments, the MEMS resonators are fabricated on the same process as the fabrication of a silicon radio. Such a bank of preselector filters uses MEMS resonators tuned to the proper frequency of operation. This approach allows high integration of the resonating MEMS devices. In various embodiments, one or more of the switches shown in FIG. 2 can be MEMS switches.

(17) FIG. 3 shows a block diagram of a system **300** including a radio **320** and an antenna **330**, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. The radio **420** can be a receiver, a transmitter, or a transceiver for radio communications. In various embodiments a bank of MEMS resonators is used to create multiple local oscillator frequencies by switching resonators to channel select the frequency of interest. In various embodiments, a bank of silicon resonators for a MEMS type oscillator circuit can be switched and provide the local oscillator frequency necessary for modulation and demodulation of an RF signal.

(18) FIG. 4 shows a block diagram of a system **400** including a radio **420** and an antenna **430**, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. The radio **420** can be a receiver, a transmitter, or a transceiver for radio communications. In various embodiments a MEMS resonator **421** is used to create an oscillator. In various applications the oscillator is a local oscillator for mixing. In various applications the oscillator is used for superheterodyne functions. This oscillator may use the individual switching of multiple resonators, or capacitors, which can tune the resonating element to change oscillator frequency. In various embodiments, a single reference oscillator consisting of a single MEMS device as its resonator is fabricated and used as the reference oscillator for a synthesizer including, but not limited to, a voltage controlled oscillator (VCO) and a phase locked loop (PLL).

(19) Other communications electronics and communications functions can be realized using the MEMS device in the wireless electronics without departing from the scope of the present subject matter. The examples given herein are intended to be demonstrative and not exhaustive or exclusive.

(20) FIG. 5 shows a plurality of different communications that can be supported, according to various embodiments of the present subject matter. System **500** demonstrates that such communications include ear-to-ear communications **540** or ear-to-remote-device communications **550** or **560** with remote device **530**. It is understood that these communications can be unidirectional, bidirectional, or combinations of both. Such communications can also include far field communications (e.g., radio frequency communications), or combinations of near field (e.g., inductive link using substantially the magnetic field) and far field communications. It is understood that remote device **530** can be any wireless devices, including, but not limited to a wireless audio controller such as that described in U.S. Patent Application Publication 2006/0274747, entitled: COMMUNICATION SYSTEM FOR WIRELESS AUDIO DEVICES, and PCT Application Publication WO 2006/133158, titled: COMMUNICATION SYSTEM FOR WIRELESS AUDIO DEVICES, which are both hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety.

(21) In various embodiments the wireless communications can include standard or nonstandard communications. Some examples of standard wireless communications include link protocols including, but not limited to, Bluetooth™, IEEE 802.11 (wireless LANs), 802.15 (WPANs), 802.16 (WiMAX), cellular protocols including, but not limited to CDMA and GSM, ZigBee, and ultra-wideband (UWB) technologies. Such protocols support radio frequency communications and some support infrared communications. It is possible that other forms of wireless communications can be used such as ultrasonic, optical, and others. It is understood that the standards which can be used include past and present standards. It is also contemplated that future versions of these standards and new future standards may be employed without departing from the scope of the present subject matter.

(22) The wireless communications support a connection between devices. Such connections include, but are not limited to, one or more mono or stereo connections or digital connections having link protocols including, but not limited to 802.3 (Ethernet), 802.4, 802.5, USB, ATM, Fibre-channel, Firewire or 1394, InfiniBand, or a native streaming interface. Such connections include all past and present link protocols. It is also contemplated that future versions of these protocols and new future standards may be employed without departing from the scope of the present subject matter.

(23) In various embodiments a protocol is used, such as the protocol described in U.S. Patent Application Publication 2006/0274747, entitled: COMMUNICATION SYSTEM FOR WIRELESS DEVICES, and PCT Application Publication WO 2006/133158, titled: COMMUNICATION SYSTEM FOR WIRELESS AUDIO DEVICES, which are both hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety. In various embodiments, a protocol is used such as the protocol in U.S. Pat. No. 7,529,565, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety. Other protocols may be used without departing from the scope of the present subject matter.

(24) FIG. 6 shows an example of a receiver using MEMS components, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. Receiver **600** includes an antenna **630** which provides a signal to the receiver **600**. The signal is multiplexed by multiplexer **602** to a bank of selectable filters **605A-N**, which are MEMS filters in one embodiment. The selectable filters **605A-N** provide inputs to a multiplexer **604** which provides a selected RF signal to mixer **606** based on the filter selection. The selected RF signal is mixed with an oscillator frequency that is selectably produced by a series of selectable resonators **615A-N**, switches **618A-N**, and oscillator **614** that is sent to the mixer **606** via amplifier **616**. In one embodiment, the resonators **615A-N** are MEMS resonators. The mixing by mixer **606** provides a resulting intermediate frequency that is passed through bandpass filter **608** and demodulated using demodulator **612**. Other variations of components and signal processing using one or more MEMS devices are possible without departing from the scope of the present subject matter. It is understood that such designs may be implemented in hearing assistance devices, including, but not limited to hearing aids. In various embodiments, one or more of the switches shown in FIG. 6 can be MEMS switches.

(25) FIG. 7 shows an example of a receiver using MEMS components, according to one embodiment of the present subject matter. Receiver **700** includes an antenna **730** which provides a signal to the receiver **700**. The signal is multiplexed by multiplexer **702** to a bank of selectable filters **705A-N**, which are MEMS filters in one embodiment. The selectable filters **705A-N** provide inputs to a multiplexer **704** which provides a selected RF signal to mixer **706** based on the filter selection. The selected RF signal is mixed with an oscillator frequency that is produced by a resonator **715** and oscillator **716** that is sent to a divider **717**. In one embodiment, the resonator is a MEMS resonator. The output of divider **717** is provided to a frequency synthesizer **750**. The output goes to the phase detector **722** which compares the phase with a signal from voltage controlled oscillator **724** in series with a loop filter **723**. The output of phase detector **722** is provided to a counter **726** and a divider **725** that is in a loop configuration with the voltage controlled oscillator **724**, loop filter **723** and phase detector **722**. The output of the frequency synthesizer is provided to mixer **706**. The mixing by mixer **706** provides a resulting intermediate frequency that is passed through bandpass filter **708** and demodulated using demodulator **712**. Other variations of components and signal processing using one or more MEMS devices are possible without departing from the scope of the present subject matter. It is understood that such designs may be implemented in hearing assistance devices, including, but not limited to hearing aids. In various embodiments, one or more of the switches shown in FIG. 7 can be MEMS switches.

(26) It is understood that variations in communications protocols, antenna configurations, and combinations of components may be employed without departing from the scope of the present subject matter. It is understood that in various embodiments the microphone is optional. It is understood that in various embodiments the receiver is optional. Antenna configurations may vary and may be included within an enclosure for the electronics or be external to an enclosure for the electronics. Thus, the examples set forth herein are intended to be demonstrative and not a limiting or exhaustive depiction of variations.

(27) The present subject matter can be used for a variety of hearing assistance devices, including but not limited to, cochlear implant type hearing devices, hearing aids, such as behind-the-ear (BTE), in-the-ear (ITE), in-the-canal (ITC), invisible-in-canal (IIC), or completely-in-the-canal (CIC) type hearing aids. It is understood that behind-the-ear type hearing aids may include devices that reside substantially behind the ear or over the ear. Such devices may include hearing aids with receivers associated with the electronics portion of the behind-the-ear device, or hearing aids of the type having receivers in the ear canal of the user. Such devices are also known as receiver-in-the-canal (RIC) or receiver-in-the-ear (RITE) hearing instruments. It is understood that other hearing assistance devices not expressly stated herein may fall within the scope of the present subject matter.

(28) This application is intended to cover adaptations or variations of the present subject matter. It

is to be understood that the above description is intended to be illustrative, and not restrictive. The scope of the present subject matter should be determined with reference to the appended claims, along with the full scope of legal equivalents to which such claims are entitled.

Claims

1. A hearing assistance device configured to be worn by a wearer, comprising: a housing; a microphone within the housing; a hearing assistance processor within the housing configured to process signals received by the microphone for the wearer of the hearing assistance device; and wireless electronics within the housing, the wireless electronics configured to connect to an antenna and including a radio frequency (RF) synthesizer having one or more micro-electro-mechanical system (MEMS) resonators configured as at least a portion of a reference oscillator for the RF synthesizer.
2. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the wireless electronics include a receiver or a transmitter.
3. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the wireless electronics include a transceiver.
4. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the RF synthesizer includes a voltage controlled oscillator (VCO).
5. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the RF synthesizer includes a phase locked loop (PLL).
6. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the reference oscillator includes a local oscillator configured for mixing signals.
7. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the reference oscillator is configured for superheterodyne functions.
8. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the reference oscillator is configured for individual switching of multiple capacitors for tuning at least one of the one or more MEMS resonators.
9. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the hearing assistance device includes a hearing aid.
10. The hearing assistance device of claim 9, wherein the hearing aid includes an in-the-canal (ITC) hearing aid, a receiver-in-canal (RIC) hearing aid, a completely-in-the-canal (CIC) hearing aid, an invisible-in-canal (ITC) hearing aid, or a receiver-in-the-ear (RITE) hearing aid.
11. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a piezoelectric resonator.
12. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include an aluminum-nitride resonator.
13. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a disc shaped resonator.
14. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a wine-glass shaped resonator.
15. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a portion of an RF pre-selector.
16. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a portion of an RF filter.
17. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a portion of an image filter.
18. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a portion of a VCO tank circuit.

19. The hearing assistance device of claim 1, wherein the one or more MEMS resonators include a portion of an IF filter.
