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Thermal-hydraulic design of fan-supplied tube-fin condensers for refrigeration cassettes aimed at minimum entropy generation

Christian J.L. Hermes*, Waldyr de Lima e Silva Jr., Felipe A.G. de Castro

Center for Applied Thermodynamics, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Federal University of Paraná, PO Box 19011, 81531990 Curitiba-PR, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The method of minimum entropy generation is used to assess the effects of several design parameters on the performance of fan-supplied tube-fin condensers for light commercial refrigeration applications (heat transfer duty ∼1 kW). A simplified mathematical model is put forward to simulate the thermal-hydraulic behavior of the condenser, and validated against experimental data obtained elsewhere, showing a good agreement between calculated and measured counterparts. The dimensionless rate of entropy generation due to heat flow across nonzero temperature difference and to viscous fluid flow is calculated for different condenser designs (number of fins and tubes, tube spacing and outer diameter) at fixed operating conditions (heat transfer duty, flow rates, inlet temperatures). It is shown that there do exist optima values for the face velocity, fin density, tube diameter and heat exchanger effectiveness that minimize the production of entropy, so that some design guidelines are proposed.

1. Introduction

In general, tube-fin heat exchangers consist of one or more rows of copper tubes with external aluminum fins through which air flows either by free convection or supplied by a fan. This type of heat exchanger has been widely used in many HVAC-R engineering applications, remarkably in light commercial refrigeration appliances (cooling capacities ∼1 kW), which consume around 1% of the electricity produced worldwide [1]. In such applications, the refrigerant flows inside the tubes whereas air flows externally over the bundle of tubes and fins. Given the importance of small-capacity refrigerators for the global energy matrix, efforts have been devoted to reduce the energy consumption of such systems. For instance, Waltrich et al. [2] analyzed the impact of the components (compressor, condenser and evaporator) on both overall system cost and COP, concluding that the heat exchangers have a wide margin for performance improvement with little or no cost penalty.

The design of tube-fin heat exchangers involves both geometric (*e.g.* tube diameter, tube spacing, number of tube rows, fin thickness, shape and spacing) and operational parameters (*e.g.* flow rates and temperatures of the air and refrigerant streams) in order to accomplish a certain heat transfer duty at the penalty of fan pumping power. Some of these parameters affect quite significantly the thermo-hydraulic performance of the heat exchanger whilst others may be relaxed. In general, performance indicators (*e.g.* heat transfer rate and pumping power) respond similarly to changes in design parameters, *i.e.* a heat transfer enhancement (desired effect) is usually followed by an increase in pressure drop and then in pumping power (undesirable effects). Therefore, the heat exchanger should be designed in such a way as to balance the heat transfer enhancement and the pumping power increase trade-offs.

A method devised for this purpose consists of counteracting the thermodynamic losses associated with irreversible heat transfer across a finite temperature difference with the irreversibilities associated with viscous fluid flow [3]. As their effects on the rate of entropy generation oppose each other, there does exist a design (geometry and running conditions) that yields the overall entropy generation towards a minimum. This method, named *Entropy Generation Minimization* (EGM) after Bejan [3], has been widely used in geometric optimization of various types of heat exchangers [4–9].

However, studies of the application of the EGM to tube-fin heat exchanger design are scarce. For instance, Saechan and Wongwises [10] applied the EGM as the objective function to conduct a computational optimization of a tube-fin condenser for air conditioning applications (cooling capacity ∼10 kW, air flow rate ∼10,000 m^3/h). Recently, Pussoli et al. [11] employed the EGM to size peripheral fin heat exchangers, a new heat exchanger concept for household refrigeration applications (cooling capacity ∼0.1 kW, air flow rate ∼100 m^3/h). Nevertheless, it has not been found in the open literature studies focusing on the design and optimization of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +55 41 3361 3239; fax: +55 41 3361 3129.
E-mail address: chermes@ufpr.br (C.J.L. Hermes).

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