



(51) International Patent Classification:
H05H 1/34 (2006.01) *B23K 9/24* (2006.01)

(21) International Application Number:
PCT/US2011/025442

(22) International Filing Date:
18 February 2011 (18.02.2011)

(25) Filing Language: English

(26) Publication Language: English

(30) Priority Data:
61/305,636 18 February 2010 (18.02.2010) US

(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **HYPERTHERM, INC.** [US/US]; Etna Road, P.O. Box 5010, Hanover, NH 03755 (US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **MATHER, Jonathan** [US/US]; 30 Cornish Stage Road, Cornish, NH 03746 (US). **FITZPATRICK, Adam** [US/US]; 286 Chase Hill Road, East Andover, NH 03231 (US).

(74) Agent: **BARNES, Rebecca, N.**; Proskauer Rose, LLP, One International Place, Boston, MA 02110 (US).

(81) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available): AE, AG, AL, AM, AO, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BH, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CL, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DO, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP, KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LY, MA, MD, ME, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PE, PG, PH, PL, PT, RO, RS, RU, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, ST, SV, SY, TH, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.

(84) Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available): ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LR, LS, MW, MZ, NA, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AL, AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK, SM, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: IMPROVED ALIGNMENT FEATURES FOR A PLASMA TORCH CONNECTOR ASSEMBLY

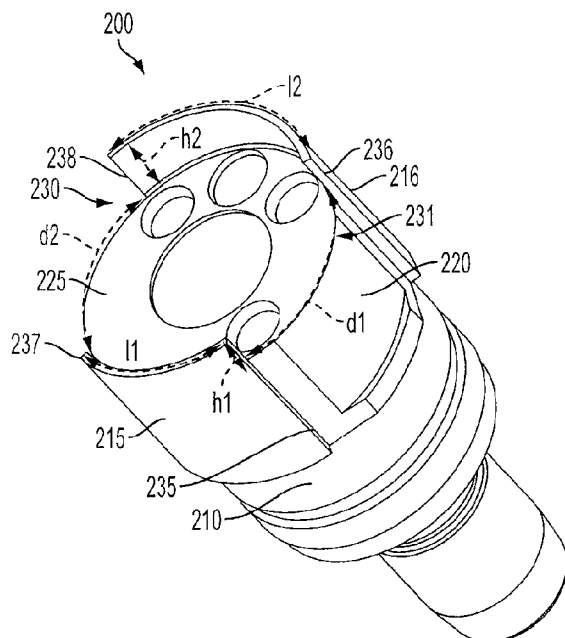


FIG. 2A

(57) Abstract: A connector assembly for coupling a plasma torch to a receptacle including a connector body configured to receive a mating connector body. The connector body is attachable to a power supply or a plasma torch. One or more circumferentially shaped blades extend axially from a surface of the connector body and form a blade ring. One or more gaps can be disposed relative to the surface of the connector body. The plurality of gaps are defined by and between the circumferentially shaped blades. A distance of the gaps between the circumferentially shaped blades extends along a portion of the circumference of the blade ring. The plurality of gaps can be asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring to facilitate proper rotational alignment, and are shaped to align with corresponding circumferentially shaped blades of the mating connector body.



Published:

— with international search report (Art. 21(3))

— before the expiration of the time limit for amending the claims and to be republished in the event of receipt of amendments (Rule 48.2(h))

IMPROVED ALIGNMENT FEATURES FOR A PLASMA TORCH CONNECTOR ASSEMBLY

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] The present invention relates generally to plasma arc cutting torches, and more particularly to improved alignment features for a plasma torch connector assembly.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Plasma arc torches are widely used for cutting metallic materials and can be employed in automated systems for automatically processing a workpiece. The system can include the plasma arc torch, an associated power supply, a positioning apparatus, and an associated controller. At least one of the plasma arc torch and the workpiece can be mounted on the positioning apparatus which provides relative motion between the torch and the workpiece to direct the plasma arc along a processing path.

[0003] A plasma torch generally includes an electrode and a nozzle having a central exit orifice mounted within a torch body, electrical connections, passages for cooling, passages for arc control fluids (e.g., plasma gas), and a power supply. A swirl ring can be employed to control fluid flow patterns in the plasma chamber formed between the electrode and nozzle. The torch produces a plasma arc, a constricted ionized jet of a gas with high temperature and high momentum. Gases used in the torch can be non-reactive (e.g., argon or nitrogen) or reactive (e.g., oxygen or air). In operation, a pilot arc is first generated between the electrode (cathode) and the nozzle (anode). Generation of the pilot arc can be, for example, by a high frequency, high voltage signal.

[0004] The consumables (e.g., electrode, nozzle, etc.) in a mechanized torch are replaced frequently, for example, the consumables can be replaced every shift or approximately every eight hours the torch is in use. To replace the consumables, the torch is disconnected from the power supply to ensure the safety of the operator. The connector assembly that connects the torch to the power supply can be located within or blocked by portions of a gantry of the positioning device. Often, the operator cannot see the connector assembly and must align several gas and coolant tubes, power and signal connections without being able to have an adequate view of the connection point. (See e.g., FIG. 3B of U.S. Patent No. 5,624,586 as an example of the connections to be made.) This can result in the gas and/or coolant tubes being misaligned, which can lead to damage of the plasma arc torch and/or receptacle.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] What is needed is a connector assembly that can be quickly and correctly aligned and installed without causing unnecessary wear, leakage, and/or damage to the gas, fluid, and electrical connections in the torch and/or receptacle. In addition, what is needed is a connector assembly that can be quickly and correctly aligned by feel when the operator is not able to visually see the connection point. Visual cues on the connector assembly or an exterior shell housing the connector assembly can help an operator to quickly and easily align the torch with the receptacle when the operator is able to see the connection point. Reducing of the overall length of the torch can also help an operator quickly and easily align the torch with the receptacle.

[0006] The invention, in one aspect, features a connector assembly for coupling a plasma torch to a receptacle. The connector assembly includes a connector body configured to receive a mating connector body. The connector body is attachable to the receptacle or the plasma arc torch. The connector assembly also includes at least one circumferentially shaped blade extending axially from a surface of the connector body. The at least one circumferentially shaped blade forms a portion of a blade ring. At least one gap is disposed relative to the surface of the connector body and is defined by and between edges of the at least one circumferentially shaped blade. A distance of the at least one gap between the edges of the circumferentially shaped blade extends along a portion of the circumference of the blade ring. The at least one gap is distributed about the blade ring. The at least one gap is shaped to align with a corresponding circumferentially shaped blade of the mating connector body.

[0007] The invention, in another aspect, features a plasma arc torch that includes a torch body having a distal end and a proximal end. Torch fittings extend from the distal end of the torch body and include an electrical connector and a plurality of fluid connectors. A connector assembly is capable of coupling the distal end of the torch body to a receptacle. The connector assembly has a connector body. At least a portion of a blade ring extends axially from a surface of the connector body. The blade ring has a first top edge and a second top edge. An axial distance to the first top edge is greater than an axial distance to the second top edge relative to the surface of the connector body.

[0008] The invention, in another aspect, features a method of connecting a plasma torch to a plasma torch receptacle. Circumferentially shaped blades of a connector body are abutted to an aligning surface of a mating connector body. The mating connector body has gaps corresponding to the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body. The connector body

is rotated relative to the mating connector body until the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body reach the corresponding gaps of the mating connector body. The connector body is axially biased towards the mating connector body such that the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body mate with the corresponding gaps of the mating connector body and rotational movement of the connector body relative to the mating connector body is restricted.

[0009] In some embodiments, the at least one circumferentially shaped blade has a pitch along a circumferential outer edge along the blade ring to facilitate rotational alignment of the connector assembly. The pitch of the at least one circumferentially shaped blade can be about 0.25 inches per 5.2 inches.

[0010] The connector assembly can also include a plurality of circumferentially shaped blades. Edges of the plurality of circumferentially shaped blades can define a plurality of gaps. The plurality of gaps can be asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring. For example, the gaps can be asymmetrical in their size, shape, and/or location along the blade ring. In some embodiments, the plurality of circumferentially shaped blades are asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring. For example, blades can be asymmetrical in their size, shape, and/or location along the blade ring. In some embodiments, the circumferentially shaped blades have varying circumferential lengths or varying heights. In some embodiments, the at least one gap is configured to align with the corresponding circumferentially shaped blade of the mating connector body in a single rotational position. The plurality of gaps can be configured to align with the corresponding circumferentially shaped blades of the mating connector body in a single rotational position.

[0011] The connector assembly can also include alignment features on an exterior surface of the connector body. The alignment features can include at least one of dots, hash marks, or arrows.

[0012] In some embodiments, the connector assembly can also include an exterior shell configured to receive the connector body. The exterior shell can surround at least a portion of the connector body.

[0013] The connector assembly can also include a coupling nut coupled to an exterior surface of the exterior shell. The coupling nut can be configured to reversibly join the connector assembly and the mating connector assembly. In some embodiments, the coupling nut is coupled to an exterior surface of the connector body and is configured to reversibly join the torch

body and the receptacle.

[0014] In some embodiments, the connector assembly includes the mating connector body. The mating connector body can be configured to receive the connector body.

[0015] The receptacle can have a corresponding blade ring that is shaped to align with the blade ring of the connector assembly. Rotational movement of the connector body relative to the receptacle can be restricted at an alignment point.

[0016] In some embodiments, rotating the connector body relative to the mating connector body is facilitated by a pitch along a circumferential outer edge along the blade ring. The connector body can be coupled to the mating connector body with a coupling nut. The aligning surface of the mating connector body can include circumferentially shaped blades. In some embodiments, the aligning surface is a surface of the mating connector body that includes pockets shaped to receive circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0017] The advantages of the invention described above, together with further advantages, may be better understood by referring to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead generally being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

[0018] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an automated plasma arc system.

[0019] FIG. 2A is a perspective view of a torch side connector, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0020] FIG. 2B is a perspective view of a receptacle side connector, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0021] FIG. 3A is a side view of receptacle side connector having a pitch along a circumferential outer edge of a circumferentially shaped blade, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0022] FIG. 3B is a side view of torch side connector having a pitch along a circumferential outer edge of a circumferentially shaped blade, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0023] FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a connector body and exterior shell, according to

an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0024] FIG. 5A is a perspective view of a connector body with alignment features, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0025] FIG. 5B is a perspective view of a connector body with a coupling nut, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0026] FIG. 5C is a side view of a connector body capable of receiving a coupling nut, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

[0027] FIGS. 6A-6F are side views of a connector assembly in varying stages of alignment, according to an illustrative embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0028] FIG. 1 shows an automated plasma arc system 100. The system 100 includes a plasma arc torch 105 with an associated power supply 110 and a gas console 115 for generating a plasma arc. A positioning apparatus 120 includes a generally planar table 125 for fixturing of a workpiece (not shown), an overlaying gantry 130 having three motorized, mutually orthogonal linear axes X, Y, and Z with the torch 105 mounted on the Z axis, and a suitable controller 135 with three axis drives. The system also includes a high frequency high voltage console 140 for generating a pilot arc in the torch 105. A connector system can be used to removably couple the torch 105 to a receptacle 145. The receptacle 145 can be coupled to or within the gantry 130 making it difficult for an operator to see how the connector body, along with the internal connections (e.g., gas and coolant tubes and electrical connections), are mated with the receptacle 140. An improper connection can cause wear, leakage, and/or damage to the gas, fluid and electrical connections in a plasma torch system.

[0029] FIG. 2A shows a torch side connector assembly 200 and FIG. 2B shows a receptacle side connector assembly 205 that can be used to align and connect a torch and receptacle of a plasma arc torch system. The torch side connector assembly 200 includes a connector body 210 that is configured to receive a mating connector body (e.g., the receptacle side connector assembly 205). The connector body 210 can be attached to a plasma arc torch. A plurality of circumferentially shaped blades 215, 216 extend axially from a surface 220 of the connector body 210. In some embodiments, circumferentially shaped blades 215, 216 extend axially from a surface 225. The connector body can have a single circumferentially shaped blade or multiple circumferentially shaped blades. A portion of a blade ring can be formed by a

circumferentially shaped blade. In some embodiments, the blade ring has a circumference that is larger than a circumference of the connector body **210**. In some embodiments, the blade ring has a circumference that is equal to or less than the circumference of the connector body **210**.

[0030] A single gap or a plurality of gaps can be disposed relative to the surface **220** of the connector body **210**, e.g., about the blade. For example, two gaps **230**, **231** can be disposed relative to the surface **220** or surface **225** of the connector body **210**. The gaps **230**, **231** are defined by and between edges of the circumferentially shaped blades **215**, **216**. For example, gap **231** is defined by a blade edge **235** of circumferentially shaped blade **215** and blade edge **236** of circumferentially shaped blade **216**. Gap **230** is defined by blade edge **237** of circumferentially shaped blade **215** and blade edge **238** of circumferentially shaped blade **216**.

[0031] The gaps **230**, **231** have a distance **d1**, **d2** between the edges of the circumferentially shaped blades **215**, **216** that extends along a portion of the circumference of the blade ring. The distance **d1** can be the distance between blade edge **235** of circumferentially shaped blade **215** and blade edge **236** of circumferentially shaped blade **216**. The distance **d2** can be the distance between blade edge **237** of circumferentially shaped blade **215** and blade edge **238** of circumferentially shaped blade **216**. The distance **d1** can be the same as the distance **d2**. In some embodiments, the distance, **d1** is different than the distance **d2**. For example, the distance **d1** can be greater than or less than the distance **d2**.

[0032] The plurality of gaps **230**, **231** can be asymmetrically or symmetrically distributed about the blade ring in such a manner that only one rotational alignment position is possible. The asymmetry can be, for example, the location of the gaps **230**, **231** around the blade ring. In some embodiments, the asymmetry of the gaps **230**, **231** is that the distances **d1** and **d2** are not the same. The gaps **230**, **231** can also have different shapes, which can result in the gaps being asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring. For example, gap **230** can have an approximately rectangular shape while gap **231** can have an approximately trapezoidal shape.

[0033] The asymmetry of the gaps **230**, **231** can be configured to permit the alignment and mating of the torch connector **200** and receptacle connector **205** in only one rotational position. For example, if gap **230** has a distance **d1** that is about 1 inch, and gap **231** has a distance **d2** that is about 1.5 inches, then the corresponding blades have one blade with a distance of about 1 inch and a second blade a distance of about 1.5 inches. The second blade, having a distance of about 1.5 inches can not mate with the gap **231** because the second blade is too large. Therefore, there is only a single position that permits aligning the connector with the corresponding mating connector body.

[0034] The plurality of gaps **230, 231** are shaped to align with corresponding circumferentially shaped blade of the mating connector body, for example, the receptacle side connector assembly **205**. The blades and/or gaps of the connectors can have any shape that can facilitate alignment and mating of the connector assemblies. For example, as shown in FIGS. **2A-B**, the circumferentially shaped blades can be substantially rectangular or square, and can have square corners.

[0035] Similar to the torch side connector assembly **200**, the receptacle side connector assembly **205** of FIG. **2B** has a connector body **240** that is configured to receive a mating connector body, for example, torch side connector assembly **200**. The connector body **240** is attachable to a power supply. The receptacle side connector assembly **205** has at least one circumferentially shaped blade and at least one gap that is defined by and between edges of the circumferentially shaped blade. As shown in FIG. **2B**, the connector body can have two blades **245, 246** and two gaps **250, 251**.

[0036] The blades **215, 216** of the connector assembly **200** can be shaped to align with the gaps **250, 251**, respectively, of connector assembly **205**. Similarly, the blades **245, 246** of connector assembly **205** can be shaped to align with gaps **230, 231**, respectively, of connector assembly **200**. Because of the asymmetry of the gaps **230, 231, 250, 251** and or blades **215, 216, 245, 246** of the connector assemblies **200, 205**, the connector assemblies **200, 205** can be properly aligned in a single rotational direction. For example, gap **250** can properly align with blade **215** but gap **250** cannot properly align with blade **216**. The gap **250** can either be too big or too small or blade **215** or the gap **250** can be positioned such that the alignment of gap **250** with blade **245** results in a gap **251** being misaligned aligned with blade **216**.

[0037] The shape of the circumferentially shaped blades **215, 216, 245, 246** can also facilitate alignment and mating of the connector assemblies **200, 205**. As shown in FIGS. **2A** and **2B**, the circumferentially shaped blades **215, 216, 245, 246** are generally rectangular in shape. In some embodiments, the blades **215, 216, 245, 246** have a generally trapezoidal shape. For example, referring to blade **245**, the top **255** can be smaller than the bottom **256** of the blade **245**. The corresponding gap **230** can be shaped similarly, having a distance between edges **237** and **238** that decreases toward surface **225**.

[0038] Referring to FIG. **2B**, the blades **245, 246** can have a chamfered edge **260, 261** to help facilitate alignment and mating of the connector assemblies **200, 205**. For example, once the connector assemblies **200, 205** are properly aligned, the chamfered edges **260, 261** can help facilitate movement of the blades **215, 216** into gaps **250, 251**, respectively, without requiring a

substantial amount of axial force by the operator to mate the connector assemblies **200**, **205**.

[0039] Referring to FIG. **2A**, the circumferential blades **215**, **216** can have varying circumferential lengths or distances **11**, **12** about the circumference of the blade ring. For example, **11** can be greater than or less than **12**. The circumferential blades **215**, **216** can also have varying heights **h1**, **h2** relative to surface **255** of the connector body **210**. The varying circumferential lengths **11**, **12** and the varying heights **h1**, **h2** of the circumferential blades **215**, **216** can help facilitate the rotational alignment of the connector assembly in a single rotational position.

[0040] Although both the torch side connector **200** and the receptacle side connector **205** are shown with blades and gaps in FIGS. **2A-2B**, either the torch side connector **200** or the receptacle side connector **205** can have pockets instead of blades and gaps. For example, referring to FIG. **2A**, instead of circumferentially shaped blades **215**, **216**, the connector body **210** can have pockets in surface **225** that extend downward into the body of the connector **200** and that correspond in size and shape to the circumferential blades **245**, **246**.

[0041] FIG. **3A** shows a receptacle side connector **300** having a pitch **302** along a circumferential outer edge **303** of a circumferentially shaped blade **303** and FIG. **3B** shows a torch side connector **305** having a pitch **307** along a circumferential outer edge **308** of a circumferentially shaped blade **309**. For example, the pitch **307** can be a taper from a first point **310** of the circumferential blade **309** to a second point **312** of the circumferential blade **309**.

[0042] The pitch can facilitate rotational alignment of the connector assembly. For example, the circumferentially shaped blades **304**, **315** of the receptacle side connector **300** can be aligned and abutted against the circumferentially shaped blades **309**, **316** of the torch side connector **305**. When a rotational motion is applied by the user to either the receptacle side connector **300** or the torch side connector **305**, the pitch can facilitate rotation in a single direction, e.g., a clockwise direction. Even absent application of a rotational motion by the user, the pitch feature can generate such a motion. This can be especially beneficial in a mechanized torch where the operator may not be able to see how the connector assembly or the internal components of the connector assembly are aligned.

[0043] In some embodiments, the pitch of the outer edge **308** of the circumferentially shaped blade **309** is about 0.25 inches per 5.2 inches. The specific pitch of the outer edge of the circumferentially shaped blade can determine how easily the connector assembly can be rotated in a desired direction or how much the rotation of the connector assembly in an undesired

direction is impeded. For example, a large pitch (e.g., a steep slope) of the outer edge of the circumferentially shaped blade, can result in a user more easily rotating the connector assembly in the desired direction (e.g., clockwise) than in the undesired direction (e.g., counter-clockwise).

[0044] FIG. 4 is shows a connector body **400** and an exterior shell **405**. The exterior shell **405** can be configured to receive a connector body **410**. The connector body **410** can be mated with the shell **405** by, for example, a threaded connection or a friction fit. The exterior shell **405** can surround at least a portion of the connector body **410**. In some embodiments, as shown in FIG. 4, the blades **415**, **416** of the connector body **410** extend past the exterior shell **405**. In other embodiments, the blades **415**, **416** are completely encompassed within the exterior shell **405** and do not extend past the exterior shell **405**.

[0045] FIGS. 5A and 5B show a connector body **500** with alignment features **505**, **506**, and a coupling nut **510**. The alignment features **505** can be on an exterior surface of the connector body (e.g., surface **220** of connector connector assembly **200** shown in FIG. 2A) or the alignment features can be on an exterior surface **515** of an exterior shell **520**. The alignment features **505**, **506** can be a series of dots, for example alignment feature **505** is comprised of two dots and alignment feature **506** is comprised of three dots. Alignment features of a torch side connector can correspond to alignment features of a receptacle side connector to help an operator determine the correct alignment of the connector assembly. For example, alignment feature **505** comprising two dots can match an alignment feature on a receptacle that also comprises two dots. The alignment features can also be hash marks or arrows. If an alignment feature that comprises two dots becomes matched with an alignment feature comprising, for example, three dots or a single dot, during alignment of the connector assembly, the operator will know that the connector assembly is not aligned properly. The alignment feature can help prevent the connector assembly from being misaligned and reduce unnecessary wear, leakage, and/or damage to the gas, fluid, and electrical connections in the torch and/or receptacle.

[0046] The coupling nut **510** can be coupled to the exterior surface **515** of the exterior shell **520**. In some embodiments, the coupling nut **510** is coupled to an exterior surface of the torch side connector and/or the receptacle side connector. The coupling nut **510** is configured to reversibly join the connector assembly and the mating connector assembly. For example, the coupling nut **510** can comprise threads (not shown) that can mate with corresponding threads of a corresponding connector assembly or exterior shell. For example, referring to FIG. 5C, a mating connector assembly **550** can include threads **555** on to which the coupling nut **510** of FIGS. 5A and 5B can be threaded. Once the connector assembly is aligned and mated in the

correct position, the coupling nut can be secured to ensure that the connector assembly maintains the correct, predetermined position. The coupling nut **510** can be easily removed to allow replacement of the connector assembly or access to the internal fluid and electrical connections. The coupling nut **510** can be, for example, located between, and used to connect, the torch **105** and receptacle **145** of FIG. 1.

[0047] A plasma arc torch system can utilize the connector assembly having a blade ring (e.g., the connector assemblies and mating connector assemblies of FIGS. **2A-B**, **3A-B**, **4**, and **5A-B**) to couple the torch body to a receptacle. The receptacle can be housed in a power supply, in a gantry, or can be disposed on a lead. In some embodiments, the receptacle has a corresponding blade ring that is shaped to align with the blade ring of the connector assembly. The blade ring connector assembly design can include a connector body that is capable of coupling the distal end of the torch to a receptacle. The connector assembly can include a portion of a blade ring that extends axially from a surface of the connector body. Referring to FIG. **3B**, the blade ring can have a first top edge located near point **310** and a second top edge located near point **312**. An axial distance **d3** of the first top edge can be greater than an axial distance **d4** of the second top edge relative to a surface **320** of the connector body **321**. In some embodiments, the outer edge **308** of the circumferentially shaped blade **309** tapers from the first point **310** or first top edge to the second point **312** or second top edge. The outer edge **308** of the circumferentially shaped blade **309** can also have a stepped, castellated or curved surface.

[0048] FIGS. **6A-6F** show a connector assembly **600** in varying stages of alignment. A connector body **605** and a mating connector body **610** can be aligned by first abutting the connector body **605** with the mating connector body **610**, rotating either the connector body **605** or the mating connector body **610** until the blades of the connector body **605** align with the gaps of the mating connector body **610** and vice versa, and axially biasing either the connector body **605** or the mating connector body **610** towards the other component. As shown in FIGS. **6A-F**, the connector body **605** is a torch side connector and is capable of mating with a plasma arc torch and the mating connector body **610** is a receptacle side connector and is capable of mating with a receptacle or a power supply. In some embodiments, the connector body is the receptacle side connector and the mating connector body is the torch side connector.

[0049] The connector body **605** can include two circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616** and two gaps **620**, **621**. Similarly, the mating connector body **610** has two circumferentially shaped blades **625**, **626** that correspond with the gaps **620**, **621** of the connector body **605**. The mating connector body **610** also has two gaps **630**, **631** that correspond with the

circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616** of the connector body **605**. Gap **630** can be defined by edge **635** of circumferentially shaped blade **625** and edge **636** of circumferentially shaped blade **626**. Gap **631** can be defined by edge **640** of circumferentially shaped blade **625** and edge **641** of circumferentially shaped blade **636**.

[0050] In some embodiments, the connector body **605** has an exterior shell **645** that surrounds at least a portion of the connector body **605**. As shown in FIGS. **6A-6F**, the exterior shell **645** can extend past the circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616**. In some embodiments, the exterior shell does not extend past the circumferentially shaped blades.

[0051] Referring to FIG. **6B**, the circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616** of the connector body **605** can be abutting against an aligning surface of the mating connector body **610**. For example, the operator can bring the connector body **605** into contact with the aligning surface of the mating connector body. The aligning surface can be, for example, the circumferentially shaped blades **625**, **626** of the mating connector body. The lengths of the circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616**, **625**, **626** can vary. For example, circumferentially shaped blade **615** of the connector body can be longer than circumferentially shaped blade **616**. Similarly, circumferentially shaped blade **625** can be longer than circumferentially shaped blade **626**. These varying lengths can help facilitate proper alignment.

[0052] The connector body **605** can be rotated relative to the mating connector body **610**. For example, the connector body **605** can be rotated in the direction shown by the arrow in FIG. **6B**. In some embodiments, the mating connector body **610** is turned relative to the connector body **605**. The rotation of the connector body or mating connector body continues until the circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616** of the connector body **605** reach the corresponding gaps **630**, **631** of the mating connector body **610**. The different shapes, heights, and lengths of the circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616**, **625**, **626** can help indicate when the connector assembly **600** is properly aligned. For example, referring to FIG. **6E**, when the connector assembly is properly aligned, rotation of the connector body **605** is restricted relative to the mating connecting body **610** at an alignment point **650**. This positive stop point **650** indicates to the operator that the connector assembly **600** is properly aligned, without the operator having to visually see the connector assembly. The operator can feel when the positive stop point **650** is reached and can then press the connector assembly towards the mating connector assembly.

[0053] Referring to FIG. **6F**, when the connector assembly **600** is properly aligned, the connector body **605** can be axially biased or pressed towards the mating connector body **610**. The circumferentially shaped blades **615**, **616** of the connector body **605** mate with the

corresponding gaps **630**, **631** of the mating connector body. Rotational movement of the connector body **605** relative to the mating connector body is restricted when the circumferentially shaped blades mate with the corresponding gaps.

[0054] The rotation of the connector body **605** relative to the mating connector body **610** can be facilitated by a pitch **655** along a circumferential edge **660** along the blade ring. The pitch **655** can provide a guide to the operator to help rotate the connector body **605** in a single direction, e.g., the direction indicated by the arrow of FIG. **6B**. In addition, the pitch **655** can help provide a positive stop point (e.g., point **650** of FIG. **6E**) when the connector assembly **600** is properly aligned.

[0055] When the connector assembly **600** is fully aligned as shown in FIG. **6F**, the connector body **605** can be coupled to the mating connector body **610** with a coupling nut (e.g., coupling nut **510** of FIG. **5A**). The coupling nut can ensure that the connector assembly remains connected during operation of the torch. The coupling nut can be disposed on the exterior surface of the exterior shell **645** or it can be disposed directly on the connector body **605** or mating connector body **610**. The coupling nut can be reversibly couple the connector body **605** to the mating connector body **610**, for example, by using threads, to allow an operator to easily and quickly attach and remove the connector assembly.

[0056] Although various aspects of the disclosed apparatus and method have been shown and described, modifications may occur to those skilled in the art upon reading the specification. The present application includes such modifications and is limited only by the scope of the claims.

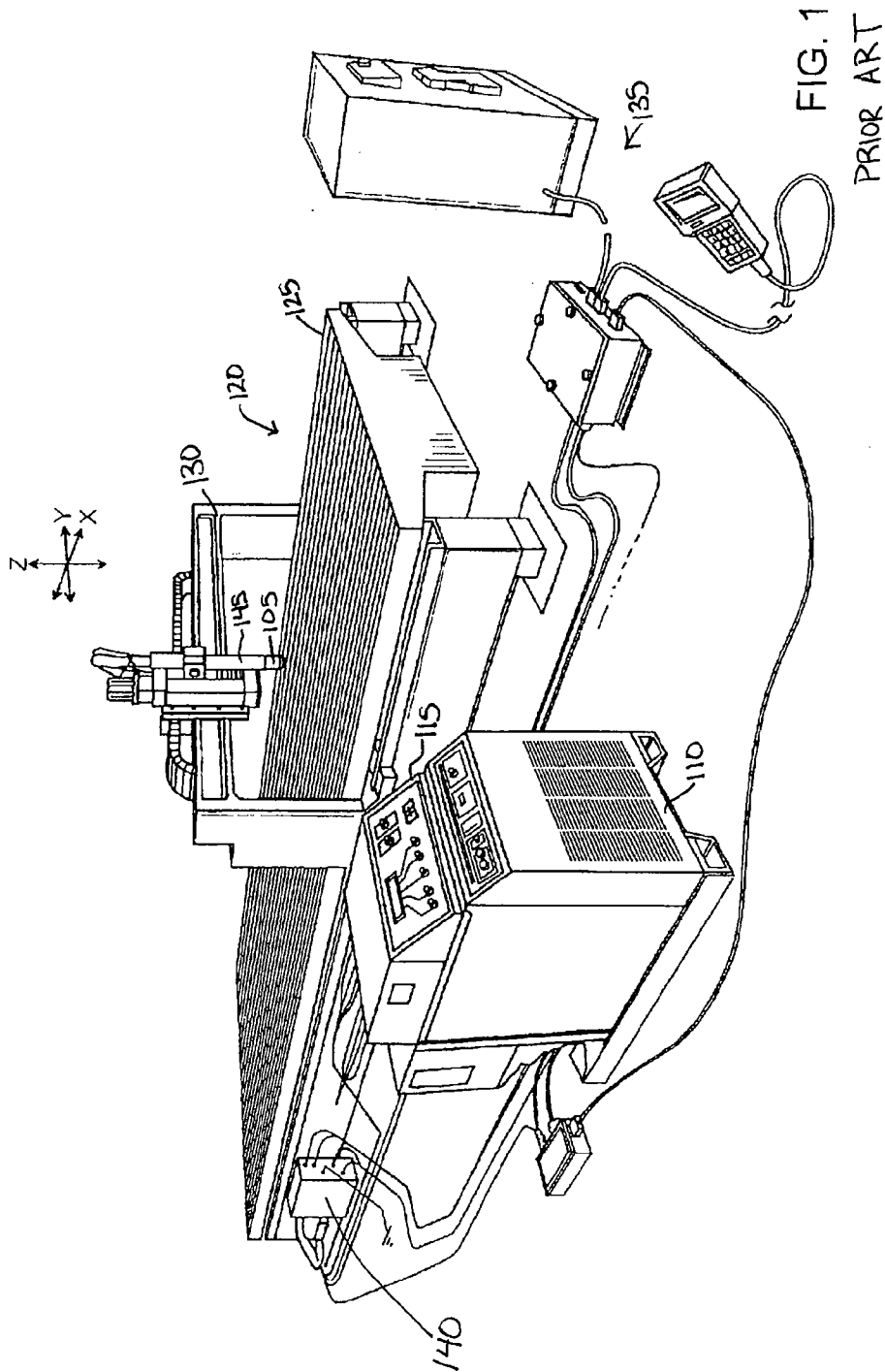
CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A connector assembly for coupling a plasma torch to a receptacle, the connector assembly comprising:
 - a connector body configured to receive a mating connector body, the connector body attachable to the receptacle or the plasma arc torch;
 - at least one circumferentially shaped blade extending axially from a surface of the connector body, the at least one circumferentially shaped blade forming a portion of a blade ring; and
 - at least one gap disposed relative to the surface of the connector body defined by and between edges of the at least one circumferentially shaped blade, a distance of the at least one gap between the edges of the at least one circumferentially shaped blade extending along a portion of the circumference of the blade ring,
 - wherein the at least one gap is distributed about the blade ring, the at least one gap shaped to align with a corresponding circumferentially shaped blade of the mating connector body.
2. The connector assembly of claim 1 wherein the at least one circumferentially shaped blade has a pitch along a circumferential outer edge along the blade ring to facilitate rotational alignment of the connector assembly.
3. The connector assembly of claim 2 wherein the pitch of the at least one circumferentially shaped blade is about 0.25 inches per 5.2 inches.
4. The connector assembly of claim 1 further comprising a plurality of circumferentially shaped blades, edges of the plurality of circumferentially shaped blades defining a plurality of gaps.
5. The connector assembly of claim 4 wherein the plurality of gaps are asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring.
6. The connector assembly of claim 4 wherein the plurality of circumferentially shaped blades are asymmetrically distributed about the blade ring.

7. The connector assembly of claim 4 wherein the circumferentially shaped blades have varying circumferential lengths.
8. The connector assembly of claim 4 wherein the circumferentially shaped blades have varying heights.
9. The connector assembly of claim 1 wherein the at least one gap is configured to align with the corresponding circumferentially shaped blade of the mating connector body in a single rotational position.
10. The connector assembly of claim 4 wherein the plurality of gaps are configured to align with the corresponding circumferentially shaped blades of the mating connector body in a single rotational position.
11. The connector assembly of claim 1 further comprising an exterior shell configured to receive the connector body and surrounding at least a portion of the connector body.
12. The connector assembly of claim 11 further comprising a coupling nut coupled to an exterior surface of the exterior shell, the coupling nut configured to reversibly join the connector assembly and the mating connector assembly.
13. The connector assembly of claim 1 further comprising the mating connector body, the mating connector body configured to receive the connector body.
14. A plasma arc torch comprising:
 - a torch body having a distal end and a proximal end;
 - torch fittings extending from the distal end of the torch body, the torch fittings comprising an electrical connector and a plurality of fluid connectors;
 - a connector assembly having a connector body and capable of coupling the distal end of the torch body to a receptacle, the connector assembly comprising:
 - at least a portion of a blade ring extending axially from a surface of the connector body, the blade ring having a first top edge and a second top edge, wherein an axial distance to the first top edge is greater than an axial distance to the second top edge relative to the surface of the connector body.

15. The connector assembly of claim 14 further comprising a coupling nut coupled to an exterior surface of the connector body, the coupling nut configured to reversibly join the torch body and the receptacle.
16. The connector assembly of claim 14 wherein the receptacle has a corresponding blade ring shaped to align with the blade ring of the connector assembly.
17. The connector assembly of claim 14 wherein the blade ring comprises a plurality of circumferentially shaped blades, edges of the plurality of circumferentially shaped blades defining a plurality of gaps.
18. The connector assembly of claim 14 wherein rotational movement of the connector body relative to the receptacle is restricted at an alignment point.
19. A method of connecting a plasma torch to a plasma torch receptacle, the method comprising:
 - abutting circumferentially shaped blades of a connector body to an aligning surface of a mating connector body, the mating connector body having gaps corresponding to the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body;
 - rotating the connector body relative to the mating connector body until the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body reach the corresponding gaps of the mating connector body; and
 - axially biasing the connector body towards the mating connector body such that the circumferentially shaped blades of the connector body mate with the corresponding gaps of the mating connector body and rotational movement of the connector body relative to the mating connector body is restricted.
20. The method of claim 19 wherein the rotating is facilitated by a pitch along a circumferential outer edge along the blade ring.
21. The method of claim 19 further comprising coupling the connector body and the mating connector body with a coupling nut.
22. The method of claim 19 wherein the aligning surface of the mating connector body comprises circumferentially shaped blades.



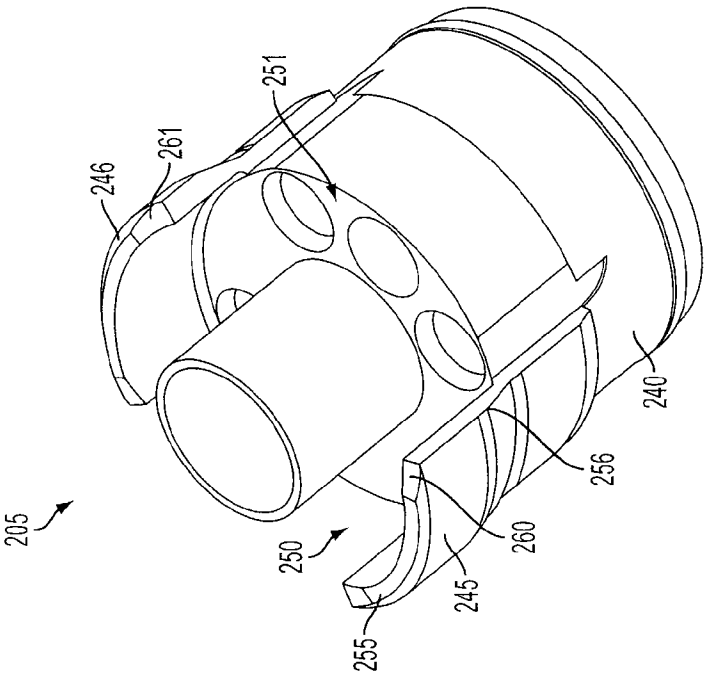


FIG. 2B

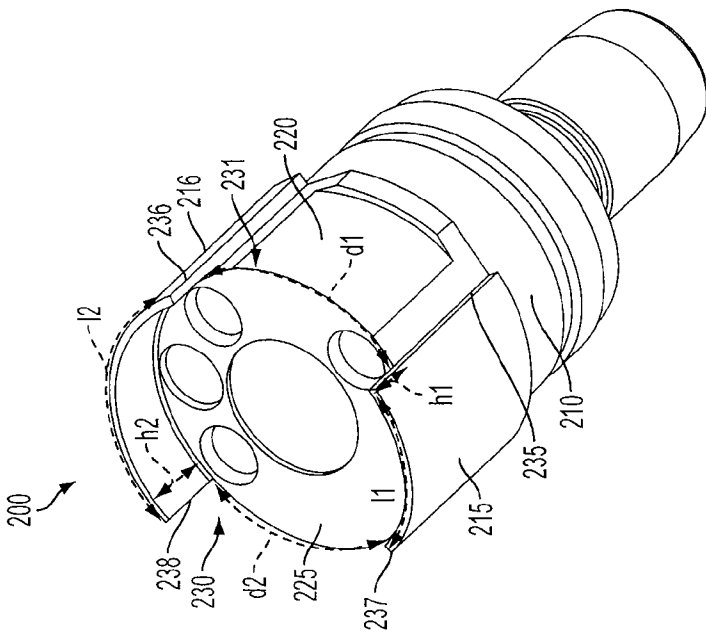


FIG. 2A

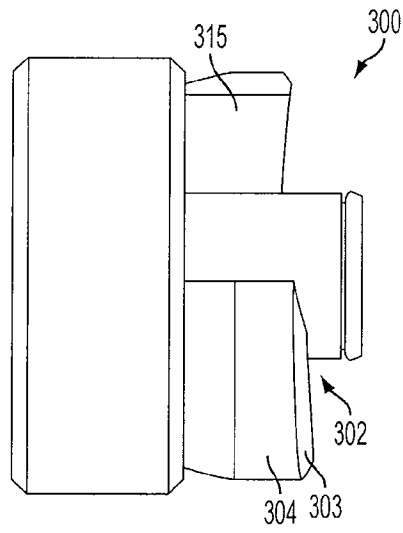


FIG. 3A

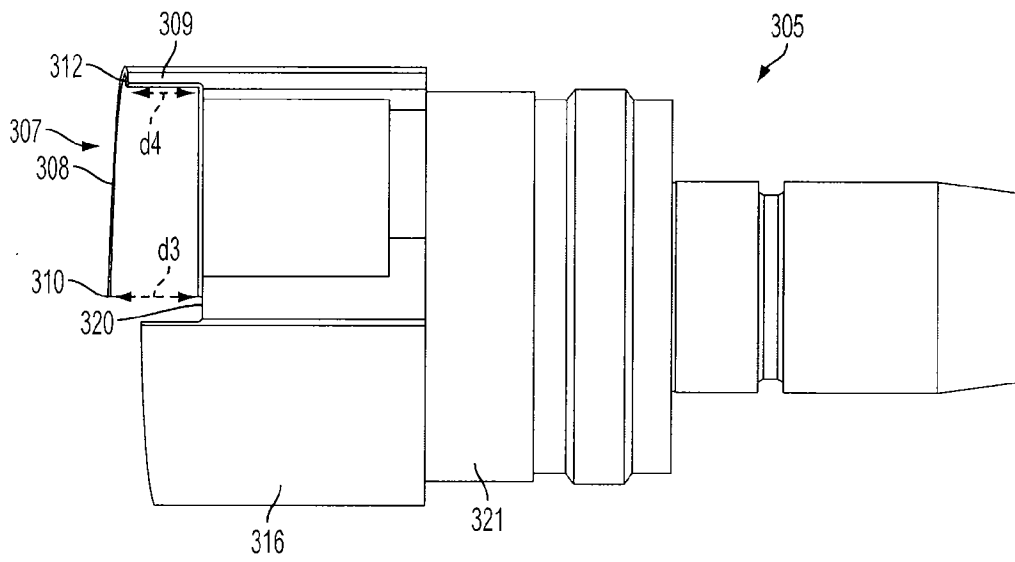
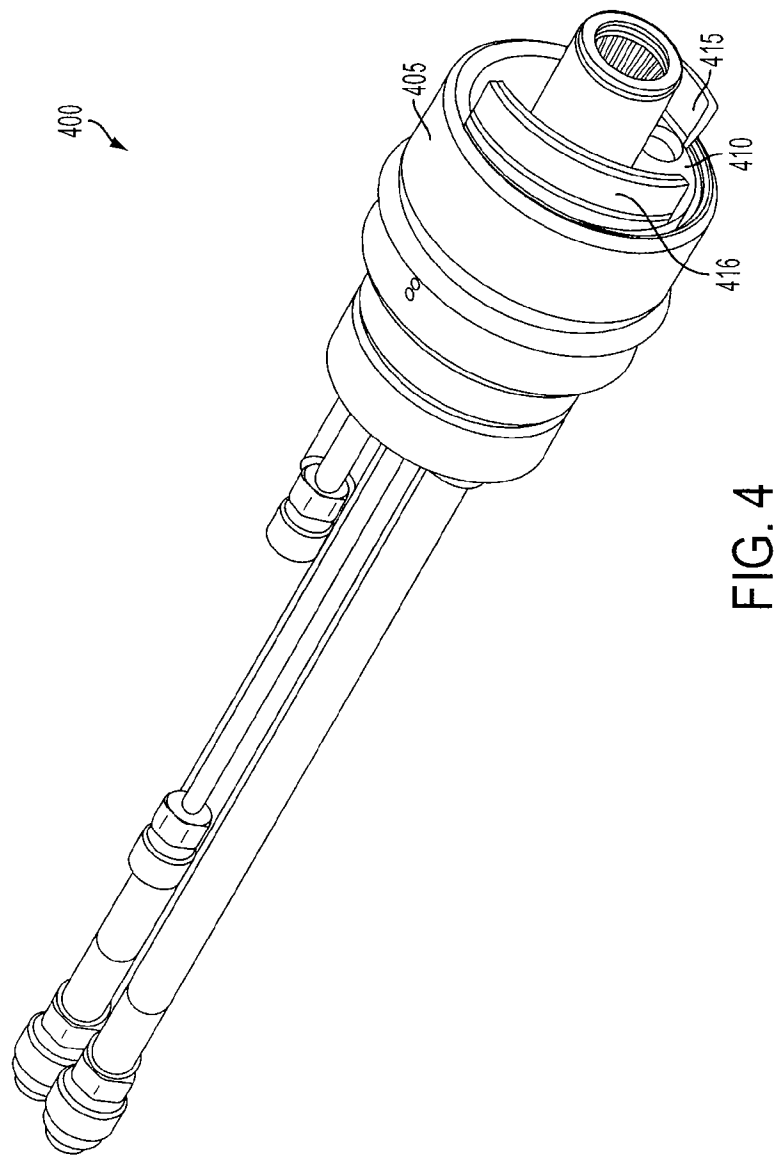


FIG. 3B



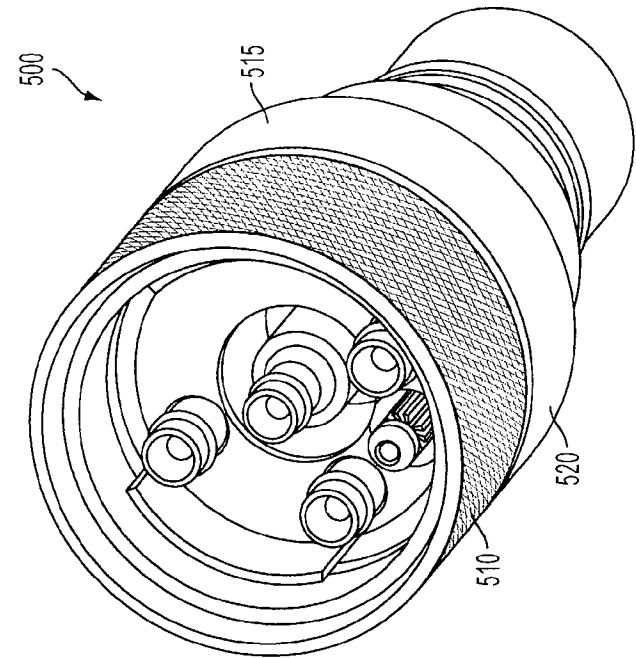


FIG. 5B

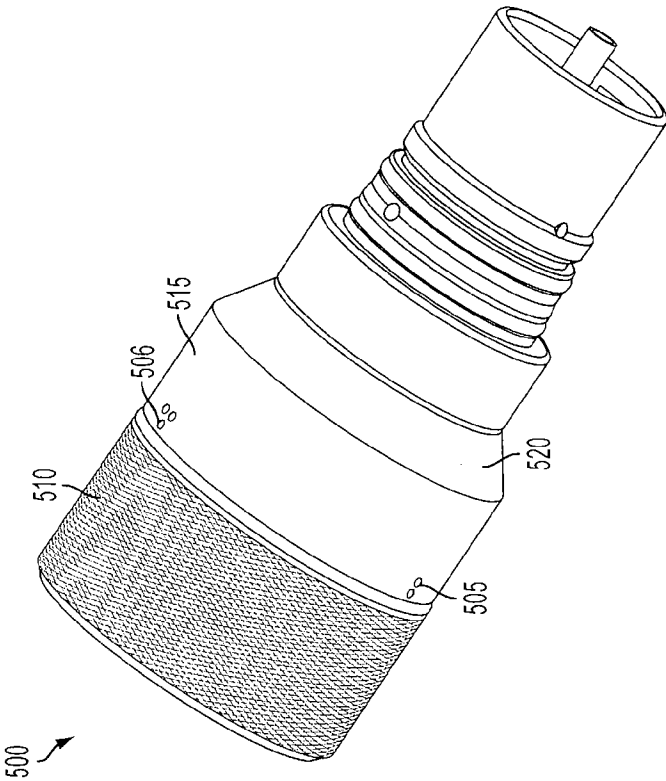


FIG. 5A

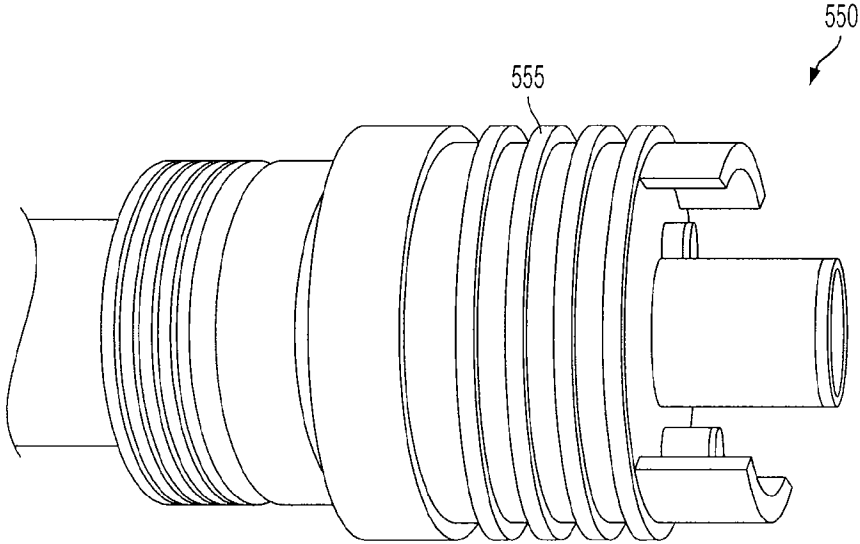


FIG. 5C

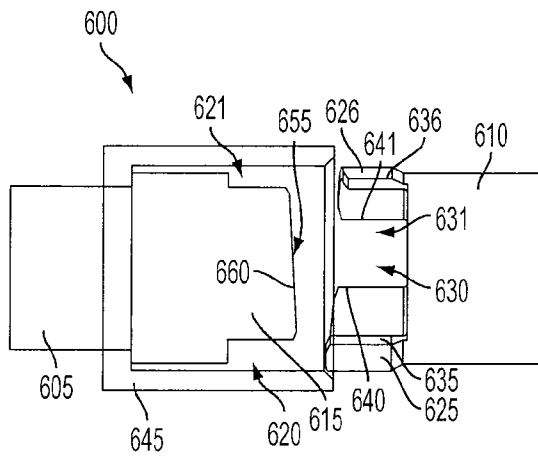


FIG. 6A

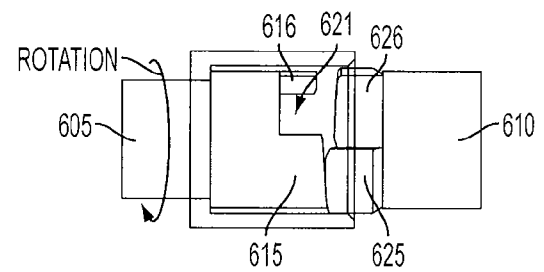


FIG. 6B

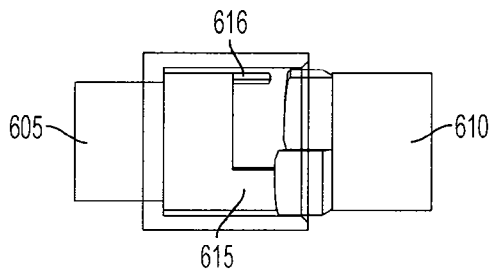


FIG. 6C

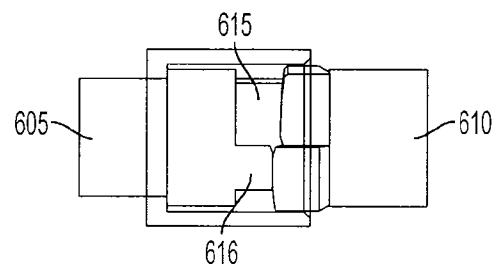


FIG. 6D

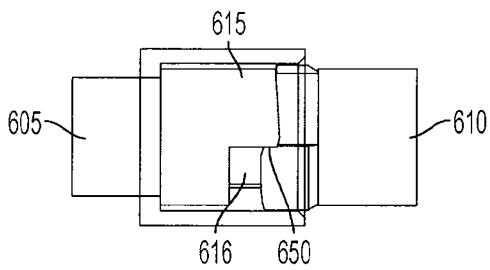


FIG. 6E

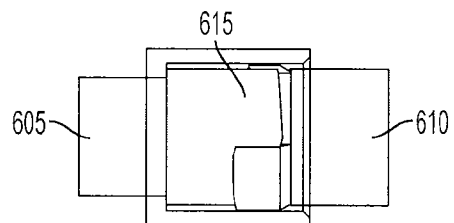


FIG. 6F

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2011/025442

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. H05H1/34 B23K9/24
ADD.

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
H05H B23K

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	JP 57 044467 A (NIPPON STEEL CORP; NITTETSU PLANT SETSUKEI KK) 12 March 1982 (1982-03-12) abstract; figures 1-12 -----	1-22
X	WO 88/04481 A1 (AMP INC [US]) 16 June 1988 (1988-06-16) abstract; figures 2,11 -----	1
A	US 2003/160032 A1 (MACKENZIE DARRIN H [US] ET AL) 28 August 2003 (2003-08-28) abstract; figures 6,7 -----	1-22
A	WO 03/089183 A1 (THERMAL DYNAMICS CORP [US]; MACKENZIE DARRIN H [US]; CONWAY CHRISTOPHE) 30 October 2003 (2003-10-30) abstract; figures 39-41 -----	1-22



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art.

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

20 June 2011

Date of mailing of the international search report

07/07/2011

Name and mailing address of the ISA/

European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2
NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk
Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040,
Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016

Authorized officer

Crescenti, Massimo

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No

PCT/US2011/025442

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
JP 57044467	A	12-03-1982	JP 1474108 C 18-01-1989
		JP 63013793 B	28-03-1988
WO 8804481	A1	16-06-1988	EP 0293408 A1 07-12-1988
		JP 1501744 T	15-06-1989
		JP 2839254 B2	16-12-1998
		US 4820204 A	11-04-1989
US 2003160032	A1	28-08-2003	AU 2003216419 A1 09-09-2003
		WO 03073803 A2	04-09-2003
WO 03089183	A1	30-10-2003	AU 2003223504 A1 03-11-2003
		AU 2003231987 A1	03-11-2003
		AU 2003233487 A1	03-11-2003
		AU 2003262415 A1	03-11-2003
		AU 2003262417 A1	03-11-2003
		AU 2003262418 A1	03-11-2003
		CA 2482910 A1	30-10-2003
		CA 2482911 A1	30-10-2003
		CN 1662337 A	31-08-2005
		CN 1662338 A	31-08-2005
		CN 1662339 A	31-08-2005
		CZ 301297 B6	06-01-2010
		CZ 301353 B6	27-01-2010
		EP 1503879 A1	09-02-2005
		EP 1503880 A1	09-02-2005
		EP 1506071 A1	16-02-2005
		KR 20050042078 A	04-05-2005
		KR 20050023251 A	09-03-2005
		MX PA04010280 A	08-06-2005
		MX PA04010281 A	08-06-2005
		WO 03089178 A1	30-10-2003
		WO 03089179 A1	30-10-2003
		WO 03089180 A1	30-10-2003
		WO 03089181 A1	30-10-2003
		WO 03089182 A1	30-10-2003