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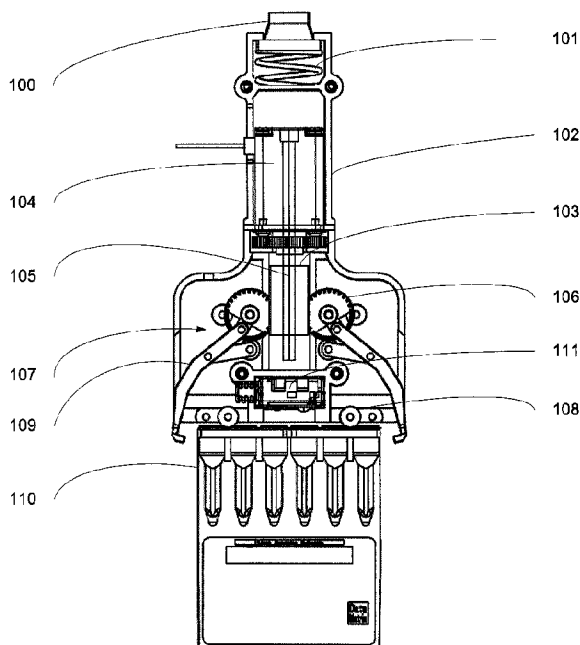
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(54) Titre : UN APPAREIL POUR SAISIR ET MAINTENIR DES CASSETTES DE DIAGNOSTIC

(54) Title: AN APPARATUS FOR GRIPPING AND HOLDING DIAGNOSTIC CASSETTES

Configuration 1 Open with Cassette



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

The invention relates generally to an apparatus for acquiring, holding, and enabling the movement of a cassette-shaped article, such as a reagent or sample cassette, which may be part of an automated diagnostic analyzer, such that the apparatus can tolerate a significant degree of cassette misplacement and/or misalignment during the acquisition maneuver. The invention provides simultaneous two-dimensional movement of the acquiring gripper jaws such that the inter-jaw distance decreases at the same time as movement in an upward vertical direction is provided while the jaw movement is adequately smooth so as not to disturb the physical state of the sample.

ABSTRACT

The invention relates generally to an apparatus for acquiring, holding, and enabling the movement of a cassette-shaped article, such as a reagent or sample cassette, which may be part of an automated diagnostic analyzer, such
5 that the apparatus can tolerate a significant degree of cassette misplacement and/or misalignment during the acquisition maneuver. The invention provides simultaneous two-dimensional movement of the acquiring gripper jaws such that the inter-jaw distance decreases at the same time as movement in an upward vertical direction is provided while the jaw movement is adequately smooth so as
10 not to disturb the physical state of the sample.

AN APPARATUS FOR GRIPPING AND HOLDING DIAGNOSTIC CASSETTES

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates generally to an apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article, particularly for acquiring, holding, and enabling the movement a reagent
5 or sample cassette as part of an automated diagnostic analyzer.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Diagnostic clinical analyzers continue to become more sophisticated especially with respect to the handling and movement of patient samples and associated reagents between multiple locations. A plethora of increasing complex pick and
10 place transports have evolved into robotic systems capable of two-dimensional, and in some cases, three-dimensional movement of patient sample containers. However, the evolution of apparatuses to physically acquire and hold such containers has not advanced especially when such containers are not simple test tubes, such as, for example, foil sealed cassettes for agglutination reactions as
15 shown in U.S. Patent No. 5,780,248. Furthermore, such patient sample container acquisition relies upon a small number of fundamental mechanisms. Cam driven machines offer the smoothest motion and control of acceleration and deceleration. They can run at high cyclic rate, however, they are big, heavy and not suitable for applications where space is limited. Hydraulic/pneumatic driven
20 machines are more compact and easier to use, but because they usually use hydraulic/pneumatic pressure to drive the components against hard stops, they create impact (which is particularly important in handling cassettes containing whole blood components) and result in noisy machines of low cyclic rate. Servo motor/stepper motor driven machines are usually slower, can be higher in cost,
25 but have more flexible operation. U.S. Patent No. 5,681,530 relates to a transport system for fluid analysis instruments that includes a cassette gripper and conveyor.

With respect to acquisition of the patient sample container, existing mechanisms tend to be specific to test tubes and are mechanically complex with many parts. In addition to having very limited capability to acquire and hold misplaced patient sample containers because of a limited motion function, these units are

5 expensive to manufacture and often have reduced reliability. Furthermore, most mechanisms impart significant inertial forces to the patient sample container which is very undesirable and potentially can result in altering the sample's physical properties. A number of these systems are noted as follows: U.S. Pat. No. 4,002,247 entitled "Machine for picking up, transferring, turning and placing

10 parts," U.S. Pat. No. 4,411,576 entitled "Pick and place mechanism," U.S. Pat. No. 4,975,018 entitled "Linear unit for transferring objects," U.S. Pat. No. 5,249,663 entitled "Apparatus to load workpieces," U.S. Pat. No. 5,333,720 entitled "Apparatus to manipulate workpieces," U.S. Pat. No. 5,467,864 entitled "Dual purpose apparatus to manipulate workpieces," U.S. Pat. No. 5,564,888

15 entitled "Pick and place machine," U.S. Pat. No. 6,264,419 entitled "Robot arm," U.S. Pat. No. 6,293,750 entitled "Robotics for transporting containers and objects within an automated analytical instrument and service tool for servicing robotics," U.S. Pat. No. 6,374,982 entitled "Robotics for transporting containers and objects within an automated analytical instrument and service tool for servicing robotics,"

20 U.S. Pat. No. 6,843,357 entitled "Two-axis robot for specimen transfer," U.S. Pat. No. 6,889,119 entitled "Robotic device for loading laboratory instruments," U.S. Pat. No. 7,131,361 entitled "Workpiece-transfer device," U.S. Pat. No. 7,448,294 entitled "Robotic devices," U.S. Pat. No. 7,563,067 entitled "Robot," PCT Publication No. WO2008067847 entitled "Container transfer apparatus with

25 automatic positioning compensation," and U.S. Publication No. 2010/0150688 entitled "Workpiece transfer system."

None of the prior references noted above disclose an apparatus capable of operating in a confined space, having a minimal number of parts, having the ability to acquire patient samples in cassettes with significant misalignment, and

imparting a movement of the apparatus particularly conducive to the acquisition and holding of non-test tube-shaped patient sample containers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 An object of the invention is to solve or at least improve upon the deficiencies of prior art noted above.

One aspect of the present invention is directed to an apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article. The apparatus includes: a support housing; a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support; a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the
10 distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article; a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator; a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is indirectly located on the jaws and is connected to the
15 jaws via linkage and a movable node on the jaws; and wherein movement of the linear actuator provides motion to the movable node in an x- and y-axis thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws opening and closing.

Another aspect of the present invention is directed to an apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article. The apparatus includes: a support housing; a linear
20 actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support; a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article; a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator; a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal
25 and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is directly located on the jaws; a drive linkage connected to the linear actuator at the center thereof, the drive linkage having elongated slots on either side of the center, the movable nodes being slidably engaged in the slots, whereupon movement of the linear actuator moves the drive linkage

which imparts linear motion to the movable node in a direction perpendicular to the motion of the slide thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws opening and closing; a set of registration dowels attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws which are
5 positioned to be capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired, a compliance block is located at the upper end of the housing; and a spring is placed under the compliance block, enabling the housing to slightly tilt, wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is
10 guided by the compliance block and spring allowing for possible misalignment of the apparatus relative to the cassette-shaped article.

Still, another aspect of the invention is directed to a method for gripping a cassette-shaped article. The method includes: providing a support housing; providing a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;
15 providing a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article; providing a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator; providing a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw
20 for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is indirectly located on the jaws and is connected to the jaws via linkage and a movable node on the jaws; positioning the housing to be located above the cassette-shaped article to be gripped; moving the linear actuator which provides motion to the movable node in an x- and y-axis thereby rotating the jaws around
25 the fixed node resulting in the jaws closing and acquiring the cassette-shaped article.

Yet another aspect of the invention is directed to a method for gripping a cassette-shaped article. The method includes: providing a support housing;
30 providing a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;

providing a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article; providing a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator; providing a fixed node
5 relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is directly located on the jaws; providing a drive linkage connected to the linear actuator at the center thereof, the drive linkage having elongated slots on either side of the center, the movable nodes being slidably engaged in the slots; providing a set of
10 registration dowels attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws which are positioned to be capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired; providing a compliance block at the upper end of the housing, and a spring under the compliance block, enabling the housing to deflect; positioning the housing to
15 be located above the cassette-shaped article to be gripped; moving the linear actuator which moves the drive linkage which imparts linear motion to the movable node in a direction perpendicular to the motion of the slide thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws closing and acquiring the cassette-shaped article; wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the
20 registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is guided by the compliance block and spring allowing for possible misalignment of the apparatus relative to the cassette-shaped article.

In a preferred embodiment of the invention the apparatus has the ability to
25 accurately acquire and securely hold diagnostic cassettes even in the presence of moderate misalignments.

Still, another preferred embodiment of the invention provide simultaneous two-dimensional movement of the acquiring jaws of the gripping apparatus such that the inter-jaw distance decreases at the same time while providing movement in
30 an upward vertical direction thus using a minimum of space.

Yet, another preferred embodiment of the invention provides an apparatus having a minimal number of parts and is therefore inexpensive to manufacture while having high reliability.

5 In another preferred embodiment, the apparatus is constructed of a combination of gears, racks, and mechanical linkage which provides a smooth movement superior to cams, pneumatic, or hydraulic driven devices and is particularly adept at not disturbing the physical characteristics of sensitive patient samples.

10 In a preferred embodiment, the invention incorporates a spring-loaded vertical drive movement such that the apparatus can tolerate a significant degree of cassette misplacement and/or gripper misalignment during the cassette acquisition maneuver. The movement of the mechanical parts acquiring the cassette is such that physical state of the sample is not disturbed and that the mechanical act of cassette acquisition takes place in a minimum of space.

In another preferred embodiment, the invention incorporates a Hoeken linkage.

15 In yet another preferred embodiment, the invention registers the patient sample container against a set of registration dowels enabling optical sensor or other feedback indicating that the patient sample container has been positively acquired. Further objects, features, and advantages of the present application will be apparent to those skilled in the art from detailed consideration of the
20 embodiments that follow.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a schematic front view of the gripping and holding apparatus in the open position according to Configuration 1 of a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The apparatus, also known as the cassette gripper unit, is contained
25 within a housing **102** which holds a linear actuator, for example, an electric servo motor **104** coupled to or configured as a leadscrew **105**. The servo motor **104** has a shaft configured as a lead screw **105** which is threaded into a rack nut **103**

or, alternatively coupled to the leadscrew with a rotating coupling. A sector gear linkage **106** is rotatably attached to the housing **102** and is configured as a Hoeken linkage **107** containing a set of jaws **109**. The end of the set of jaws **109** attached to the sector gear linkage **106** is designated as the proximal end and
5 the end of the set of jaws **109** that grips the diagnostic cassette **110** is designated as the distal end. The upward movement of a cassette **110** is constrained by a set of registration dowels **108**. A compliance block **100**, such as an elastomeric block, and spring **101** allow the cassette gripper unit to acquire and place cassettes with a degree of misalignment. The presence or absence of
10 a cassette **110** securely pressed against the registration dowels **108** is sensed by an optical sensor **111**.

Fig. 2 is a schematic front view of the gripping and holding apparatus, also known as the cassette gripper unit, in the closed position according to Configuration 1 of a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The
15 apparatus is contained within a housing **102** which holds a linear actuator, for example, an electric servo motor **104** coupled to or configured as a leadscrew **105**. The servo motor **104** has a shaft configured as a lead screw **105** which is threaded into a rack nut **103** or, alternatively coupled to the leadscrew with a rotating coupling. A sector gear linkage **106** is rotatably attached to the housing
20 **102** and is configured as a Hoeken linkage **107** containing a set of jaws **109**. The upward movement of a cassette **110** is constrained by a set of registration dowels **108**. A compliance block **100** and spring **101** allow the cassette gripper unit to acquire and place objects with a degree of misalignment. The presence or absence of a cassette **110** securely pressed against the registration dowels
25 **108** is sensed by an optical sensor **111**.

Fig. 3 is a schematic front view of the gripping and holding apparatus, also known as the cassette gripper unit, in the open position according to Configuration 2 of a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The
apparatus is contained in a housing **102** which holds a linear actuator, for
30 example, an electric servo motor **104** coupled to or configured as a leadscrew.

The servo motor **104** has a shaft **301** configured as a lead screw which is threaded into a drive link **300** or, alternatively coupled to the leadscrew with a rotating coupling. A set of jaws **302** is provided where the upper end of the set of jaws **302** which is attached to the drive link **300** is designated as the proximal end and the lower end of the set of jaws **302** which grips the diagnostic cassette is designated as the distal end. The set of jaws **302** is attached to the drive link **300** such that the proximal end of the jaws **302** is allowed to slide horizontally within the drive link **300**. The upward movement of a cassette **110** is constrained by a set of registration dowels **108**. A compliance block **100** and spring **101** allow the cassette gripper unit to acquire and place objects with a degree of misalignment. The presence or absence of a cassette **110** securely pressed against the registration dowels **108** is sensed by an optical sensor **111**.

Fig. 4 is a schematic front view of the gripping and holding apparatus in the closed position apparatus, also known as the cassette gripper unit, according to Configuration 2 of a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The apparatus is contained in a housing **102** which holds a linear actuator, for example, an electric servo motor **104** coupled to or configured as a leadscrew. The servo motor **104** has a shaft **301** configured as a lead screw which is threaded into a drive link **300** or, alternatively coupled to the leadscrew with a rotating coupling. A set of jaws **302** is attached to the drive link **300** such that the proximal end of the jaws **302** is allowed to slide horizontally within the drive link **300**. The upward movement of a cassette **110** is constrained by a set of registration dowels **108**. A compliance block **100** and spring **101** allow the cassette gripper unit to acquire and place objects with a degree of misalignment. The presence or absence of a cassette **110** securely pressed against the registration dowels **108** is sensed by an optical sensor **111**.

Fig. 5 is a schematic diagram of the details of the Configuration 1 linkage. A motor shaft configured as a lead screw **105** is threaded into a rack nut **103**. The sector gear linkage **500** rotating about a joint denoted by node **A1** is engaged into the rack nut **103** such that a set of jaws **501** moves in response to the

rotation of the lead screw **105** via primary joints at nodes **B1** and **B2**, and a secondary joint at node **A2** associated with a link arm **502**. The movement of the distal end of the set of jaws **501** is indicated by arrows **503**. Joints denoted by nodes **A1** and **A2** are link-to-housing rotationally pinned and joints denoted by nodes **B1** and **B2** are link-to-link pinned.

Fig. 6 is a schematic diagram of the details of the Configuration 2 linkage. A motor shaft configured as a lead screw **301** is threaded into a drive crossbar slider **300**. The upper end of a set of jaws **302** is engaged into the drive crossbar slider **300** such that the proximal end of the set of jaws **302** slides horizontally left or right within the drive crossbar slider **300** in response to the rotation of the lead screw **301**. The movement of the distal end of the set of jaws **302** is circular and is indicated by arrows **600**. Joints denoted by node **D** are link-to-housing rotationally pinned and joints denoted by node **C** are link-to-crossbar slider pinned (such that horizontal left or right movement is allowed).

Fig. 7 is a diagram of the Hoeken Linkage coupler curve. The movement of the distal end of the link arm **701** is indicated by a dotted curve **700**. The proximal end of the link arm **701** is connected to the sector gear link **703** at the joint denoted by node **B1**. The sector gear link **703** is rotationally attached to the housing **102** at the joint denoted by node **A1**. A connecting link **702** is attached to the link arm **701** at the joint denoted by node **B2** and is rotationally attached to the housing at the joint denoted by node **A2** is the third component of the Hoeken linkage. Rotation of the sector gear link **703** imparts movement to the distal end of the link arm **701**. Joints denoted by nodes **A1** and **A2** are link-to-housing rotationally pinned and joints denoted by nodes **B1** and **B2** are link-to-link pinned.

Fig. 8 is a schematic diagram of the details of the left element of the set of jaws **109** as shown in Figs. 5 and 6. A profile of this element is shown in the front view, and in the side view of this element, a tapering notch **800** is shown in the distal portion of the set of jaws **109**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

While the present invention is described with respect to the preferred embodiments described below and shown in the figures, the present invention is limited only by the metes and bounds of the claims that follow.

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The apparatus and methods described herein enable the rapid and secure acquisition of diagnostic cassettes in a diagnostic clinical analyzer for subsequent movement within or removal from the analyzer. Examples of known diagnostic analyzers include immunodiagnostic analyzers such as the Vitros®
10 ECI immunodiagnostic analyzer or the Vitros® 3600 immunodiagnostic analyzer, or clinical chemistry analyzers such as the Vitros® 5,1 FS, or Vitros® 5600 all sold by Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, Inc. Representative systems are disclosed, for example, in U.S. Published Patent Application No. 2003/0026733 and in U.S. Application No. 11/091,283 filed March 28, 2005. Other examples include blood
15 immunochemistry analyzers used in blood typing operations, such as those disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,681,530 and 5,594,808, and blood donor screening apparatus, such as those sold under the Ortho Summit System™ sold by Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, Inc. As used herein, all such analyzers are collectively called “diagnostic analyzers.”

20 The benefits of the apparatus may include the ability to acquire the diagnostic cassette in the presence of minor misplacement or misalignment of the cassette's position, the ability to acquire the cassette while transmitting a minimal amount of force to the patient sample, the ability to acquire the cassette in a minimal amount of space, the ability of the acquiring mechanism to have a
25 minimal number of parts with subsequent high reliability, and the ability to register acquisition of the cassette and to signal that acquisition via optional feedback sensors.

For a general understanding of the disclosed technology, reference is made to the drawings. In the drawings, like reference numerals have been used to

designate identical elements. In describing the disclosed technology, the following term(s) have been used in the description.

5 The term “housing” refers herein to a supporting structure, frame, cage, enclosure, encompassment, or substrate to which various other structural elements are attached providing a measure of rigidity such that the cassette gripper apparatus can be used and moved as a unit.

The term “link” refers herein to a rigid body which contains at least two nodes which are points for attachment to other links or a support. A “binary link” has two nodes; a “ternary link” has three nodes, etc.

10 A “node” refers herein to positions on a link where other links may be attached resulting in a joint.

A “joint” refers herein to a connection between two or more links (at their nodes), which allows some motion, or potential motion, between the connected links. Joints may be of the form of a “rotating pin joint” which allows one degree of freedom for movement or of the form of a “translating slider joint” which also
15 allows one degree of freedom of movement, among others (see Robert L. Norton, Design of Machinery, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 2003).

The term “lead screw” refers herein to a mechanism designed to translate rotational motion into linear motion. This is accomplished by the rotation of a threaded rod that has been inserted into a nut such that when the threaded rod is
20 rotated the nut is moved a specified linear distance (depending upon the pitch of the threads in the rod).

The term “rack nut” refers herein to a lead screw nut having female threads, threaded into a lead screw, and held in a fixed orientation such that rotation of

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the lead screw produces linear motion in the rack nut. Furthermore, at least one side of the rack nut has a rack structure which engages a circular pinion or gear such that linear motion of the rack nut causes rotational motion of the pinion or gear.

5 One aspect of the invention is directed to an apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article, such as a gripping apparatus for acquiring and holding a diagnostic cassette **110** while operating in a highly confined space. Figures 1 and 2 show Configuration 1 of the cassette gripper unit. This unit may be attached to a system, such as a diagnostic analyzer, by an arm (not shown)
10 connected to the compliance block **100**. Raising and lowering of the arm provides z-axis movement to the cassette gripper unit. The arm also provides movement in the x-axis and y-axis directions to appropriately place the cassette **110**. Other suitable mechanisms to secure the unit to the analyzer and provide movement to the unit may also be used. The cassette gripper unit when being
15 lowered may not be perfectly square with the top of the cassette being acquired and the compliance block **100** in cooperation with the spring **101** allows the cassette gripper unit to tilt at a slight incline or gimbal slightly such that the top of the cassette is in light contact with both registration dowels **108**. Hence, the mechanism has the ability to accommodate a degree of misalignment between
20 the cassette **110** and the bottom of the cassette gripper unit. The cassette gripper unit as denoted by Configuration 1 includes a set of jaws **109** that while closing both reduce the inter-jaw gap and at the same time provide vertical movement. The exact movement profile is governed by the mechanical configuration of a Hoeken's linkage **107**, described more fully below in
25 connection with Figure 7. A set of jaws **109** that operates in the aforementioned manner initially move downward and inward toward the cassette **110** being acquired subsequently providing lift in the vertical direction **503**. Ultimately the vertical movement causes the top of the diagnostic cassette **110** to be pushed securely against the registration dowels **108**. These registration dowels **108** may
30 be composed of compliant materials such as rubber or soft, flexible polymer

which deforms upon contact with the diagnostic cassette **110**. The deformation of the registration dowels **108** provides a tension between the diagnostic cassette **110** and the jaw **109** insuring a firm and secure grip on the cassette **110**. Also, the tapered notch **800** cut into the arm of the set of jaws **109** tends to center the cassette in the set of jaws **109** allowing for an additional degree of misalignment. The presence of the cassette **110** in the proper position is sensed by an optical sensor **111** such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. Alternatively, the deformation of the registration dowels may cause pressure to be applied to a micro-switch or strain gauge-like sensor enabling the sending of a signal that the diagnostic cassette **110** has been acquired and is held in the proper position. Note that the use of a Hoeken linkage **107** enables movement of the set of jaws **109** using a very small amount of space, but at the cost of some mechanical complexity.

Fig. 1 is a schematic front view of a preferred embodiment of the gripping apparatus, also known as the cassette gripper unit, denoted as Configuration 1. The various components of Configuration 1 are located within a housing **102** featuring a compliance block **100** and a spring **101** to allow for slight positional misalignments between the registration dowels **108** and the top edge of the cassette **110** as the cassette gripper unit is lowered. A servo motor **104** having a shaft configured as a lead screw **105** is attached to the upper portion of the housing **102**. Alternatively, the shaft of the servo motor **104** may be connected to a separate lead screw by several commonly known mechanisms including a rotating coupling. The lead screw **105** is threaded into a rack nut **103** having racks on both the left and right sides. Sector gear links **106** are engaged into the rack nut **103** in a rack-and-pinion configuration and comprise an essential component of the Hoeken linkage **107**. In operation, the application of electromotive force to the servo motor **104** imparts a forward rotation of the shaft subsequently turning the lead screw **105** causing the rack nut **103** to move linearly in a downward direction. This downward movement of the rack nut **103** causes the sector gear links **106** to rotate in a counter-clockwise manner,

imparting movement to the Hoeken linkage **107** resulting in simultaneous downward and inward movement followed by an upward motion **503** of the distal end of the set of jaws **109**. The distal end of the set of jaws **109** contact the diagnostic cassette **110**, center the cassette into the tapered notch **800**, and
5 move it slightly upwards such that the top of the cassette is forced against the registration dowels **108**. The presence of the cassette **110** in the proper position is sensed by the optical sensor **111** such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. Alternatively, the compression of the registration dowels causes a micro-switch or strain gauge-like sensor to
10 trip, or alternatively, a load exceeding a specific threshold on the servo motor is reached, and, in either case, an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. At this point the cassette **110** has been acquired and is securely held for further movement by the diagnostic clinical analyzer.

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Fig. 2 shows Configuration 1 in the closed position with the diagnostic cassette **110** in the fully acquired and held position.

Another aspect of the invention is directed to a gripping apparatus having a
20 minimal number of parts and, therefore, being less expensive to manufacture, having high reliability, and having precise movements. Referring to Figures 3 and 4, the cassette gripper unit denoted by Configuration 2 includes a set of jaws **302** that while closing both reduce the distal inter-jaw gap and at the same time providing vertical movement. However, unlike the Hoeken linkage of
25 Configuration 1, each side of the set of jaws **302** is rotationally pinned to the housing **102** at a single point near their mid-section. This only provides for the distal end of the set of jaws **302** to be able to close inwardly in a circular motion. The distal end of a set of jaws **302** that operates in the aforementioned manner move inward toward the cassette **110** being acquired, centers the cassette **110** in
30 the tapered notch **800**, and provides lift in the vertical direction. The limited number of parts comprising the linkage (three) results in a mechanism having

greater precision than Configuration 1 in that mistakes in manufacturing and mounting are multiplied by the number of members of the mechanism (see Robert L. Norton, Design of Machinery, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 2003). Ultimately the vertical movement causes the top of the diagnostic
5 cassette **110** to be forced securely against the registration dowels **108**. In a manner similar to Configuration 1, the presence of the cassette **110** in the proper position is sensed by the optical sensor **111** such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. Alternatively, the compression of the registration dowels causes a micro-switch or strain gauge-like
10 sensor to trip, or alternatively, a load exceeding a specific threshold on the servo motor is reached, such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. At this point the cassette **110** has been acquired and is securely held for further movement by the diagnostic clinical analyzer.

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Fig. 3 is a schematic front view of a preferred embodiment of the gripping apparatus, known as the cassette gripper unit, denoted Configuration 2. The various components of Configuration 2 are located within a housing **102** featuring a compliance block **100** and a spring **101** to allow for positional misalignments
20 between the gripper apparatus and the position of the cassette during the initial downward movement to acquire the cassette in a manner similar to that of Configuration 1. A servo motor **104** having a shaft configured as a lead screw **301** is attached to the upper portion of the housing **102**. Alternatively, the shaft of the servo motor **104** could be attached to a lead screw by a number of
25 commonly known mechanisms including a rotating coupling. The lead screw **301** is threaded into a drive link **300** to which the proximal portion of the set of jaws **302** have been pinned in a configuration known as a translating slider joint such that sliding movement in the horizontal direction is enabled. The set of jaws **302** have been rotationally pinned to the housing **102** at about mid-length and are
30 only capable of circular movement. In operation, the application of electromotive force to the servo motor **104** imparts a forward rotation of the shaft and

subsequently turns the lead screw **301** causing the drive link **300** to move linearly in an upward direction. This causes the proximal ends of the set of jaws **302** to move outward via the translating slider joints. The distal end of the set of jaws **302** then move inwardly in a circular motion. The distal ends of the set of jaws **302** contact the diagnostic cassette **110** and move it slight upwards such that the top of the cassette is forced against the registration dowels **108**. In a manner similar to Configuration 1, the presence of the cassette **110** in the proper position is sensed by the optical sensor **111** such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. Alternatively, the compression of the registration dowels causes a micro-switch or strain gauge-like sensor or, alternatively, a threshold exceeding load on the servo motor, such that an acquisition signal is sent terminating the application of electromotive force. At this point the cassette **110** has been acquired and is securely held for further movement within the diagnostic clinical analyzer. Note that the use of a drive link **300** coupled with a set of jaws **302** capable of only circular movement requires greater space in which to operate relative to Configuration 1, but results in a simpler mechanism having less cost and greater reliability.

Fig. 4 shows Configuration 2 in the closed position with the diagnostic cassette **110** in the fully acquired and held position.

Fig. 5 shows further details of Configuration 1. Here the shaft configured as a lead screw **105** is shown threaded into the rack nut **103** with the sector gear link **500** which is rotationally connected to a joint formed by node **A1** and the housing **102**, engaged into the rack (not shown) of the rack nut **103**. As previously noted, the shaft of the servo motor **104** could be simply connected to a lead screw. In particular, the components of the Hoeken linkage **107** are detailed as (1) a sector gear link **500** rotationally connected to a joint formed by node **A1** and the housing **102**, (2) an arm link (or one-half of the set of jaws) **501** having two joints the first joint formed by node **B1** which connects the sector gear link **500** and the arm link **501** and the second joint formed by node **B2** which connects the connecting link

502 and the arm link **501**, and (3) a connecting link **502** which has two joints the first joint formed by node **B2** connecting the arm link **501** and the connecting link **502** and the second joint formed by node **A2** which rotationally connects the connecting link **502** to the housing **102**. It is important to note that the joints of the Hoeken linkage **107** components are of two types (1) the type designated as **A1** or **A2** has the link rotationally pinned to the housing **102** and (2) the type designated as **B1** or **B2** has one link rotationally pinned to another link. Hence, the sector gear link **500** and the connecting link **502** being rotationally pinned to the housing **102** can only rotate in a circular manner about the point at which they are connected. Whereas, the arm link **501** is free to move such that the distal end of the arm link **501** (or alternatively, the distal end of one component of the set of jaws **501**) traces the Hoeken movement **503**.

Fig. 6 shows further details of Configuration 2. Here the servo motor shaft configured as a lead screw **301** is threaded into the drive link **300**. As previously noted, the shaft of the servo motor **104** could be simply connected to a lead screw. In particular, note that this mechanism is composed of only three mechanical parts. The proximal end of the arm link **302** (or one-half of the set of jaws) is connected to the drive link **300** by a translating slider joint formed by node **C** and the arm link **302** is rotationally connected to the housing **102** by a joint formed by node **D**. Furthermore, it is important to note that the above joints are of two types (1) the type designated as **D** has the link rotationally pinned to the housing **102** and (2) the type designated as **C** has one link pinned to another link such that the connection is free to slide in one-dimension. Hence, the arm link **302** can only rotate about the joint formed by node **D** in response to upward or downward movement of the drive link **300** where the translating slider joint formed by node **C** to the arm link **302** is allowed to slide one-dimensionally in the horizontal direction.

Fig. 7 shows a schematic diagram of the Hoeken's Linkage Coupler Curve. The Hoeken curve **700** is traced by distal end of the arm link **701** (or alternatively for

the present invention, the distal end of one of the components of the jaws) through rotation of the sector gear link **703** as coupled to the arm link **701** and the connecting link **702**. Connections between the links are of two types; a type **A1** or **A2** connection is where the link component is rotationally pinned to the housing **102** and a type **B1** or **B2** connection is where one link is connected to another link. Note that in the present invention that only the left most portion of the Hoeken curve is utilized.

Fig. 8 shows details of the one component of the set of jaws **109**. Note that in the side view that there is a notch **800** cut into the distal end of the jaw. This notch **800** gently tapers such that upon closing of the set of jaws **109**, the notch **800**, which is larger than the thickness of the wall of the cassette **110**, has a tendency to center the position of the cassette while it is being held.

In a particularly preferred embodiment, the apparatus according to the present invention is particularly suited for systems that detect and quantify agglutinates formed in response to immunological agglutination reactions, i.e., immunohematology blood analyzers. In such systems, gel or glass bead micro particles are contained within a small column, referred to as a microcolumn. A reagent such as anti-IgG is dispensed in a diluent in the microcolumn and a test red blood sample is placed in a reaction chamber above the column. The column, which is typically one of a multitude of columns formed in a transparent cassette, is then centrifuged. The cassette is handled by the cassette gripper according to the present invention. Such systems are described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,681,530, 5,905,808 and 5,911,000. A typical cassette used in column agglutination technology (CAT) is described in 5,780,248, described above.

In such systems, a cassette **110** stored in a storage unit is moved into a dispensing condition below an opening in the unit. The cassette gripper unit, which is attached to a movable arm, moves in the direction the storage unit until

superimposed over the cassette 110 which is to be removed from the storage unit. Thereafter, gripper unit contacts the cassette as described above, which is then clampingly engaged by gripper unit jaws 109. Thereafter, the cassette 110 is lifted outwardly of the storage unit and may be passed by an adjacent bar code reader which will ascertain information as to the proper orientation of the cassette, that the desired cassette has been removed from the storage unit, that the cassette has not reached its expiration dating, and miscellaneous information as to the sequence number and lot number of the cassette, all of which information may then be transmitted to the memory of a computer and stored therein.

The cassette gripper unit then transports the cassette 110 to an incubator. At this point, a piercer punches one or more apertures through the foil covering on the cassette. Blood and reagents may then be dispensed into the cassette 110, which may then be incubated.

The gripper unit then transports the cassette to a centrifuge, which spins; for instance, initially for two minutes at 55g and for three minutes at 199g, so as to provide for suitable admixing of the blood sample and reagent in each of the respective wells. Upon completion of the centrifuging action, the gripper member engages the centrifuged cassette and transfers it to a read station. Upon completion of the read, the cassette is disposed of.

The foregoing is adapted to be computer program-controlled by a computer which is well known to those skilled in the art.

It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made to the methods and processes of this invention. Thus, it is intended that the present invention cover such modifications and variations, provided they come within the scope of the appended claims and their equivalents.

CLAIMS

1. An apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article comprising;
 - a support housing;
 - a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;
 - a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article;
 - a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator;
 - a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is indirectly located on the jaws and is connected to the jaws via linkage to a respective node on a respective jaw; and
 - a sector gear linkage having a toothed side and a linkage extending away from the toothed side, the end of the linkage opposite the sector gear linkage connected to the movable node; and a rack on the linear actuator, wherein sector gear linkage teeth and rack teeth are engaged and where movement of the rack rotates the sector gear linkage imparting motion to the linkage which imparts motion to the jaws through the movable node,wherein movement of the linear actuator provides motion to the movable node in an x- and y-axis thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws opening and closing.
2. An apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the linear actuator comprises a motor and a rotatable lead screw driven by said motor.
3. An apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising
 - a set of registration dowels,
 - a compliance block, and
 - a spring,

wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is guided by the compliance block and spring.

4. An apparatus according to claim 3, further wherein the set of registration dowels are attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws and which are positioned to be capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired, wherein the compliance block is located at the upper end of the housing and the spring is placed under the compliance block, enabling the housing to deflect.

5. An apparatus for gripping a cassette-shaped article comprising;
a support housing;
a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;
a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article;
a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator;
a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is directly located on the jaws;
a drive linkage connected to the linear actuator at the center thereof, the drive linkage having elongated slots on either side of the center, the movable nodes being slidably engaged in the slots, whereupon movement of the linear actuator moves the drive linkage which imparts linear motion to the movable node in a direction perpendicular to the motion of a slide thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws opening and closing;
a set of registration dowels attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws which are positioned to be capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired,
a compliance block is located at the upper end of the housing; and

a spring is placed under the compliance block, enabling the housing to slightly tilt, wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is guided by the compliance block and spring.

6. An apparatus for gripping a diagnostic cassette comprising:

a housing,

a servo motor,

a rotatable lead screw driven by said motor,

a rack nut,

a sector gear linkage, and

a set of jaws,

wherein the application of electromotive force to the servo motor causes rotation of the lead screw in a first direction which imparts linear motion to the rack nut in a first direction resulting in rotational movement of the sector gear linkage in the opposite direction producing an inward rotation of the set of jaws to a predetermined point which allows the diagnostic cassette to be gripped by the jaws.

7. An apparatus as claimed in claim 6, wherein upon gripping the cassette, the set of jaws are retracted upward into the housing.

8. A method for gripping a cassette-shaped article comprising;

providing a support housing;

providing a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;

providing a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article;

providing a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator;

providing a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed

node is indirectly located on the jaws and is connected to the jaws via linkage to a respective node on a respective jaw;

providing a sector gear linkage having a toothed side and a linkage extending away from the toothed side, the end of the linkage opposite the sector gear linkage connected to the movable node; and a rack on the linear actuator, wherein sector gear linkage teeth and rack teeth are engaged and where movement of the rack rotates the sector gear linkage imparting motion to the linkage which imparts motion to the jaws through the movable node; positioning the housing to be located above the cassette-shaped article to be gripped; moving the linear actuator which provides motion to the movable node in an x- and y-axis thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws closing and acquiring the cassette-shaped article.

9. A method according to claim 8, further comprising

providing a set of registration dowels, attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired,

providing a compliance block, located at the upper end of the housing, and a spring, placed under the compliance block, enabling the housing to slightly tilt,

wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is guided by the compliance block and spring.

10. A method for gripping a cassette-shaped article comprising:

providing a support housing;

providing a linear actuator movable along an x-axis relative to the support;

providing a set of jaws for gripping the cassette-shaped article, each jaw having a proximal end and a distal end, the distal end being adapted for gripping the cassette-shaped article;

providing a movable node located at the proximal end of each jaw for connecting each jaw to the linear actuator;

providing a fixed node relative to the support located between the proximal and distal end of each jaw for connecting each of the jaws to the support, wherein the fixed node is directly located on the jaws;

providing a drive linkage connected to the linear actuator at the center thereof, the drive linkage having elongated slots on either side of the center, the movable nodes being slidably engaged in the slots,

providing a set of registration dowels attached to the bottom of the housing near the distal end of each of the jaws which are positioned to be capable of being abutted by the cassette-shaped article once the cassette-shaped article has been acquired,

providing a compliance block at the upper end of the housing, and a spring under the compliance block, enabling the housing to deflect,

positioning the housing to be located above the cassette-shaped article to be gripped;

moving the linear actuator which moves the drive linkage which imparts linear motion to the movable node in a direction perpendicular to the motion of a slide thereby rotating the jaws around the fixed node resulting in the jaws closing and acquiring the cassette-shaped article; wherein acquisition of the cassette is guided by the registration dowels and the movement of the cassette-shaped article is guided by the compliance block and spring.

Fig. 1 -- Configuration 1 Open with Cassette

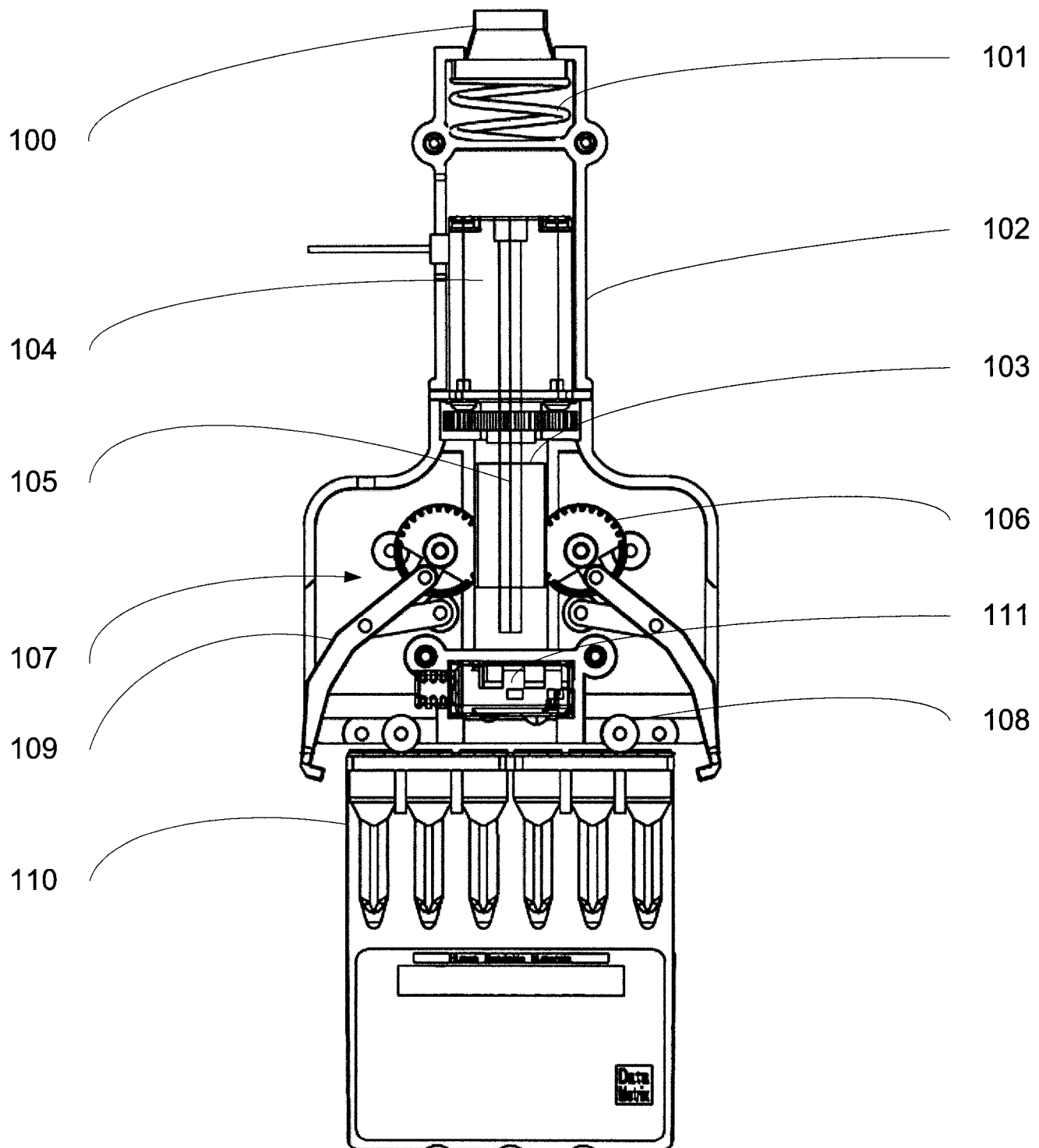


Fig. 2 -- Configuration 1 Closed with Cassette

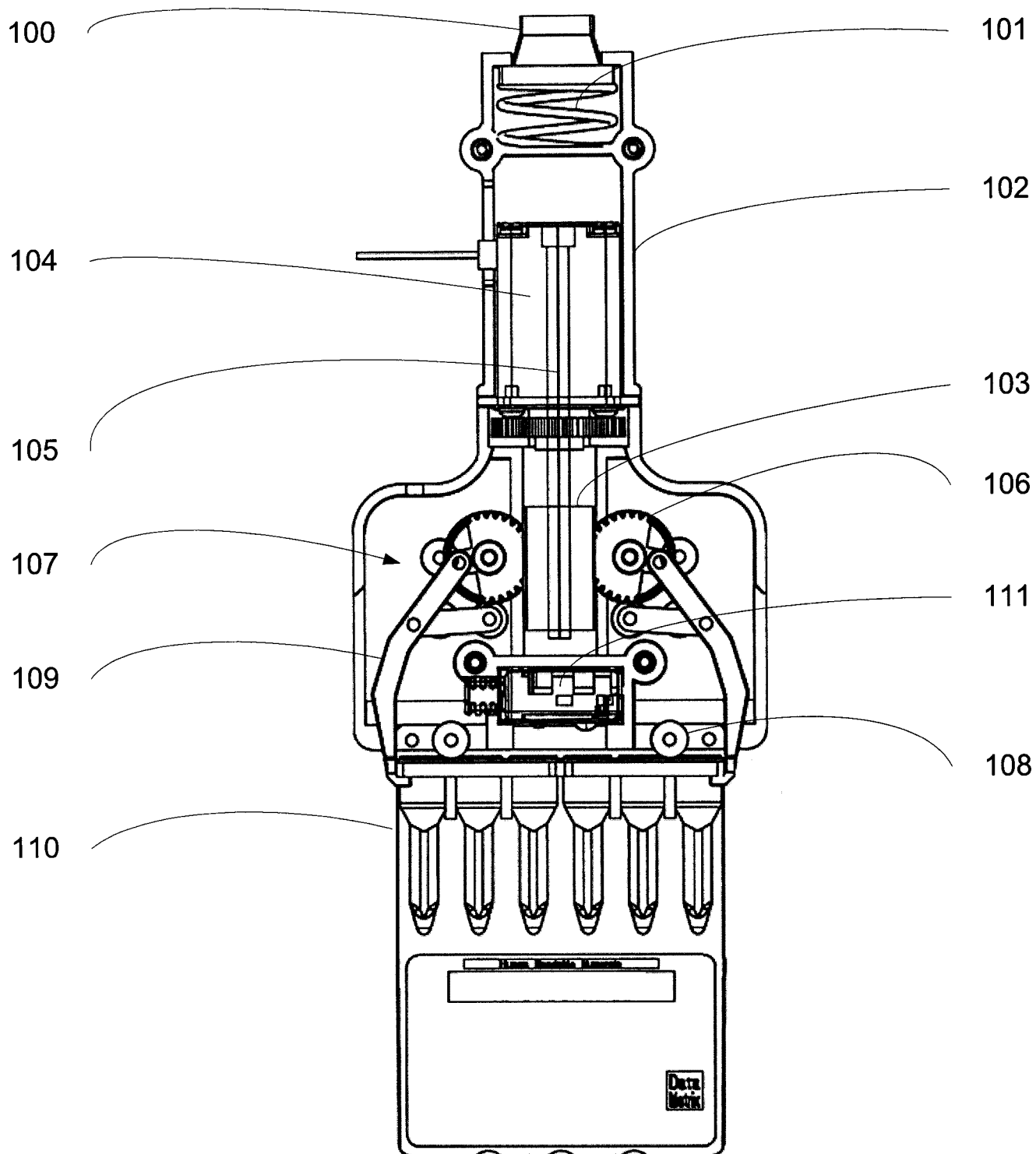


Fig. 3 -- Configuration 2 Open with Cassette

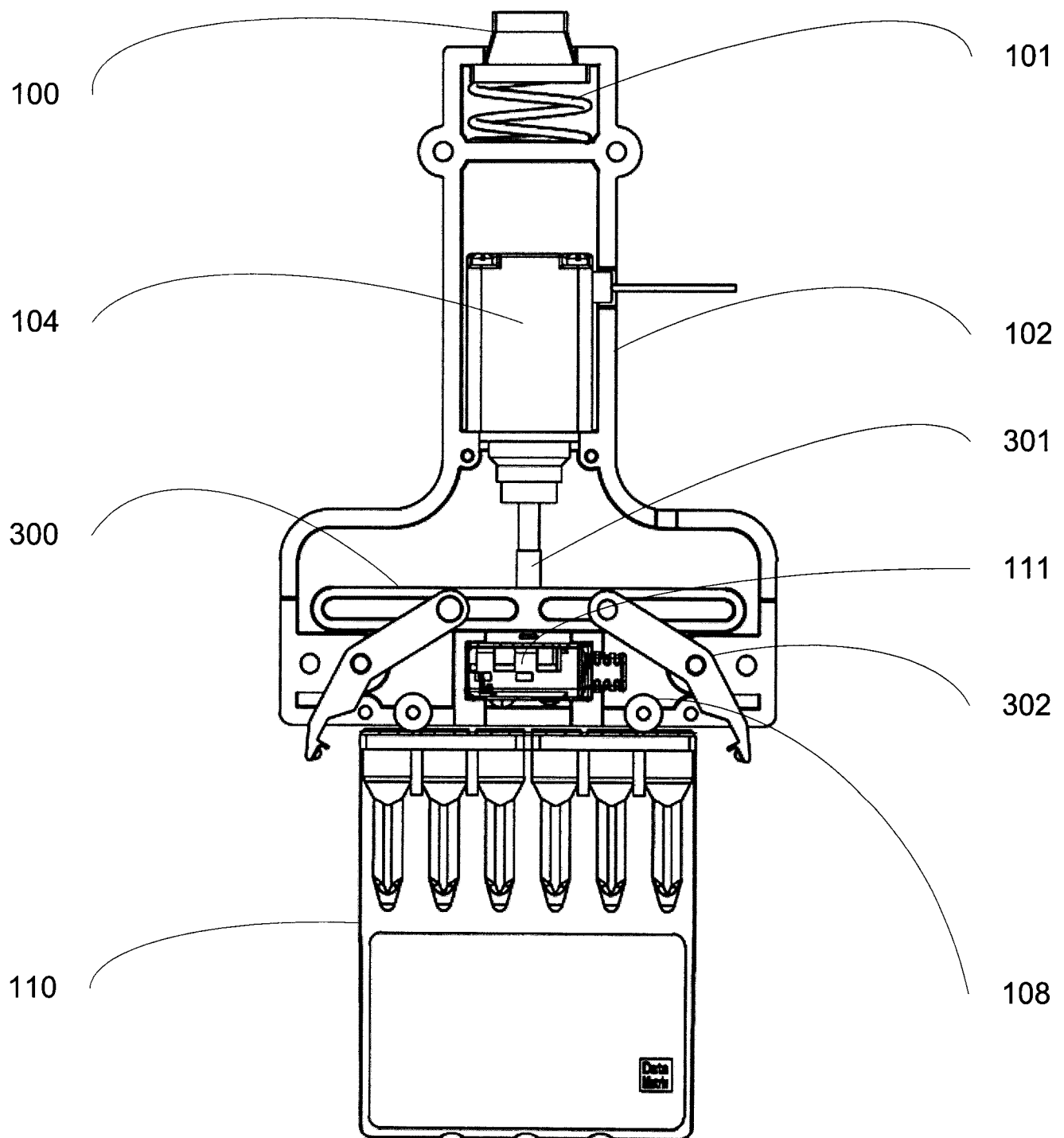


Fig. 4 -- Configuration 2 Closed with Cassette

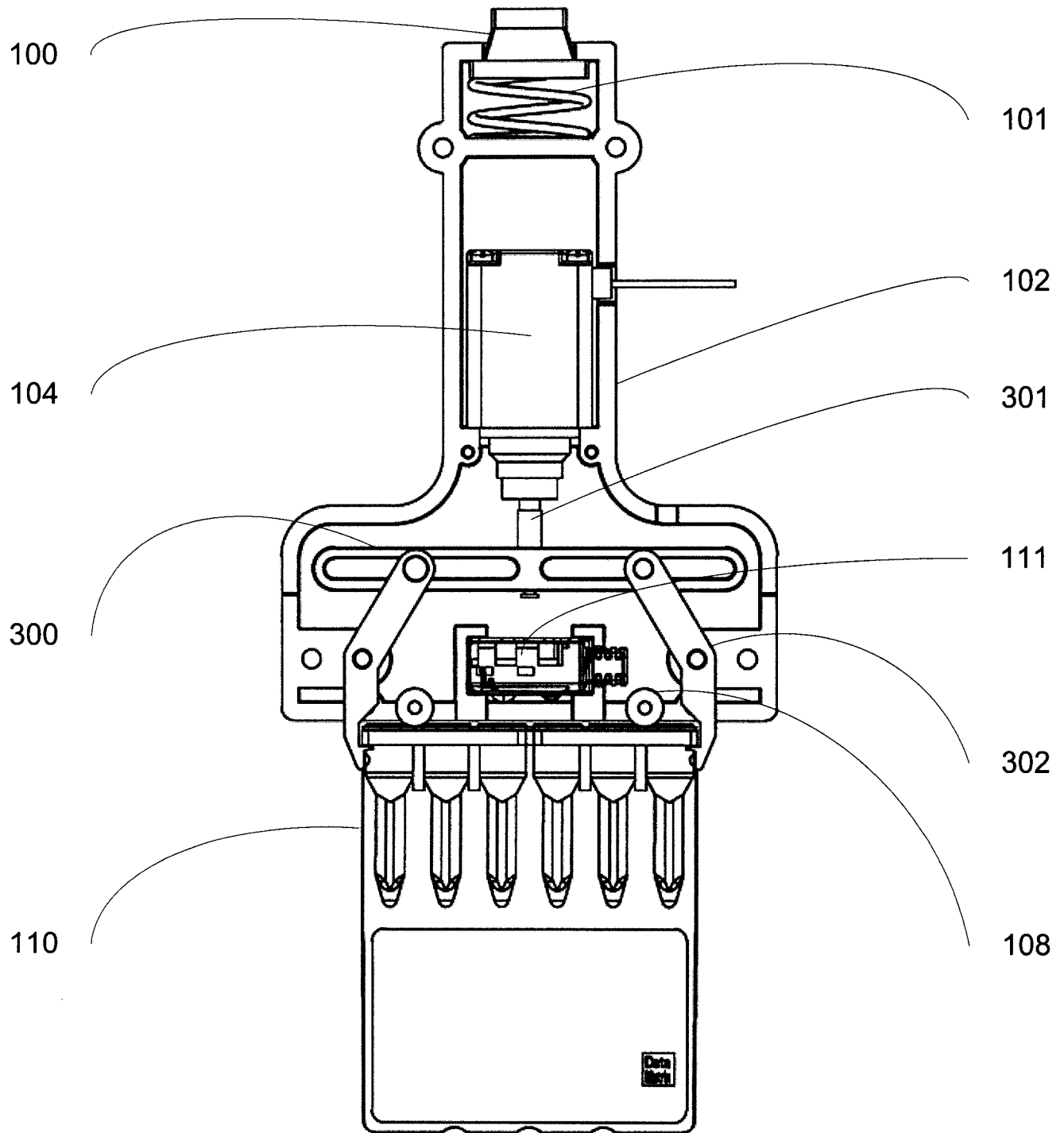


Fig. 5 -- Configuration 1 Linkage Details
(Not to Scale)

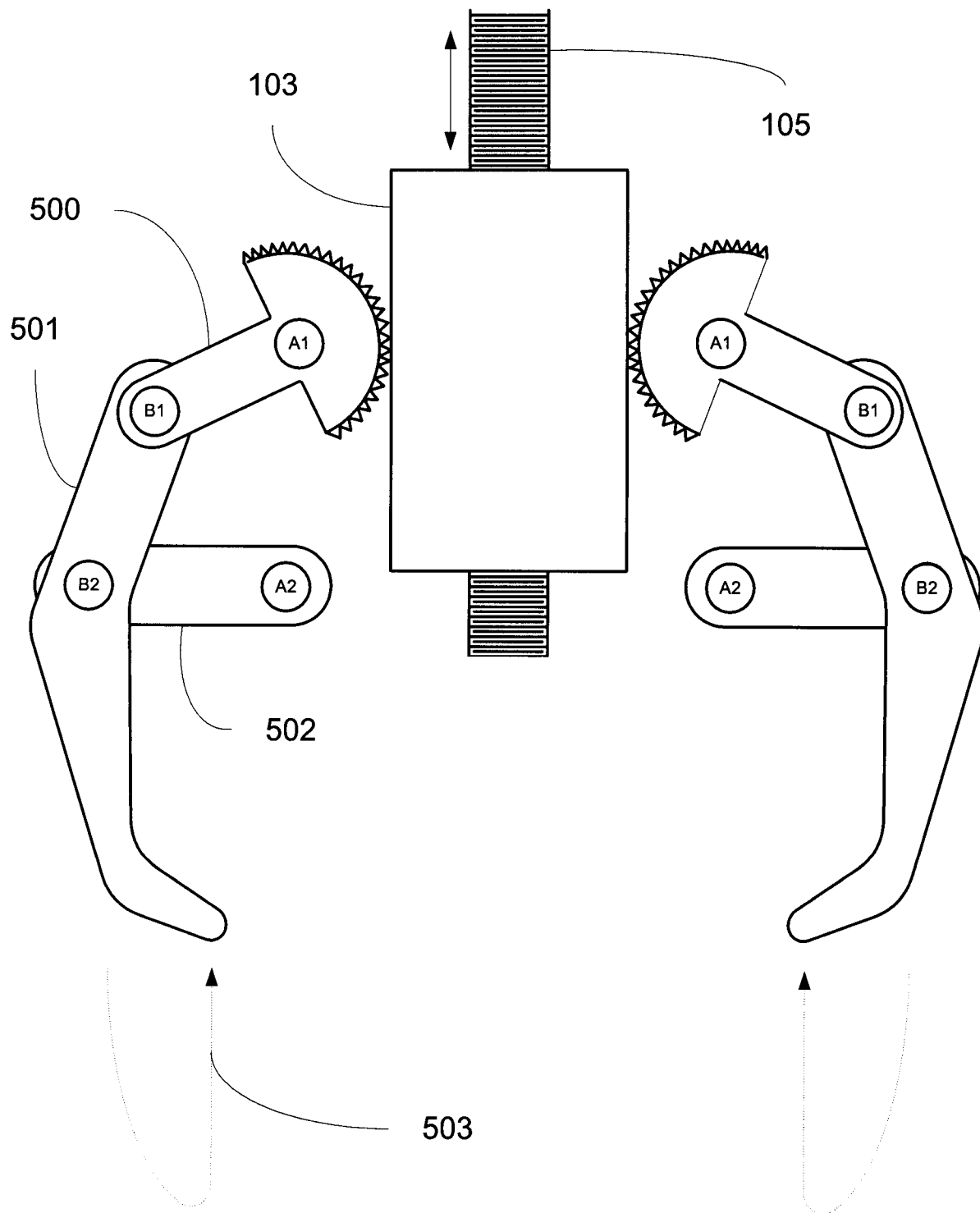
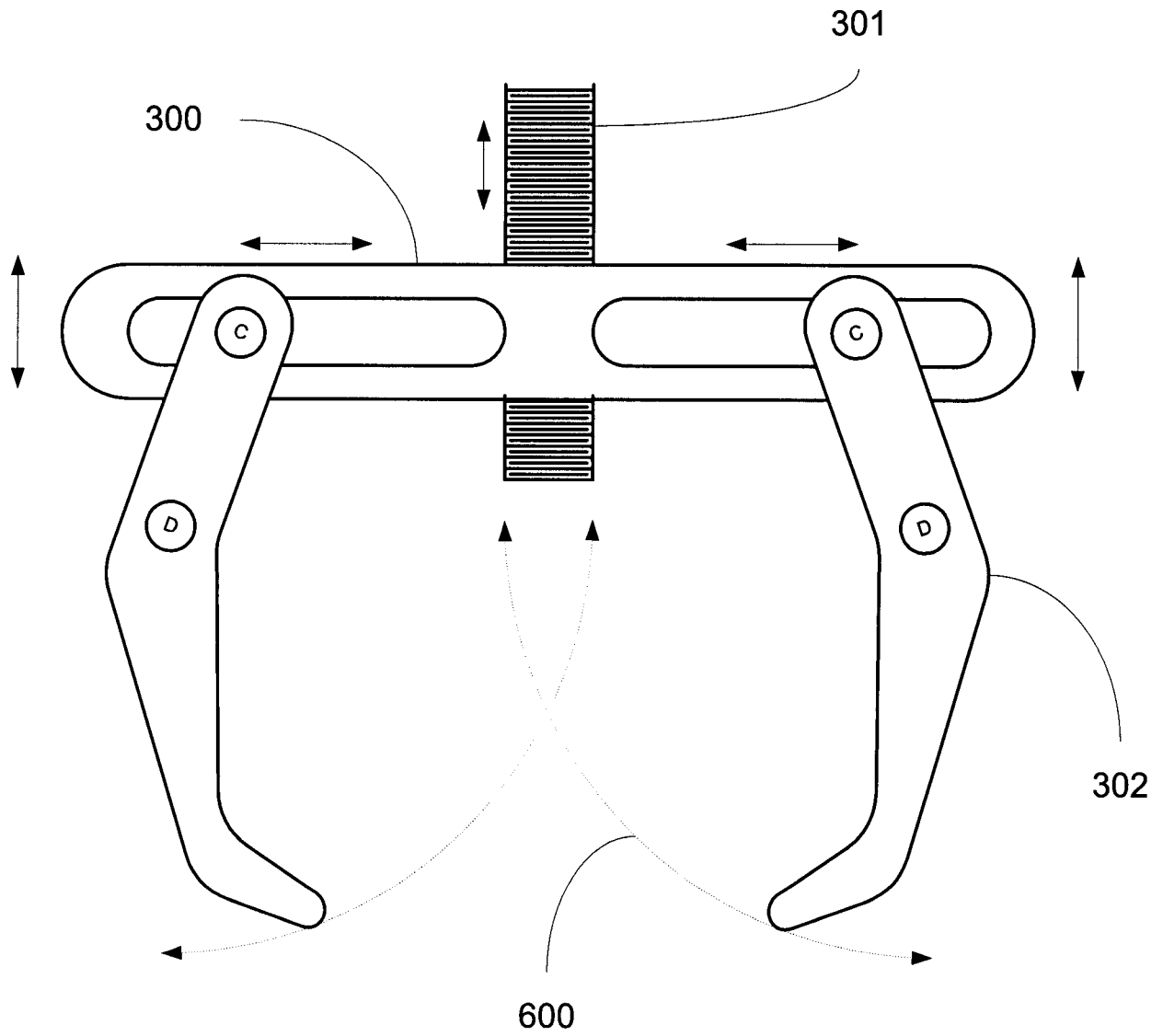


Fig. 6 -- Configuration 2 Linkage Details
(Not to Scale)



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Fig. 7 -- Hoeken's Linkage Coupler Curve
(Not to Scale)

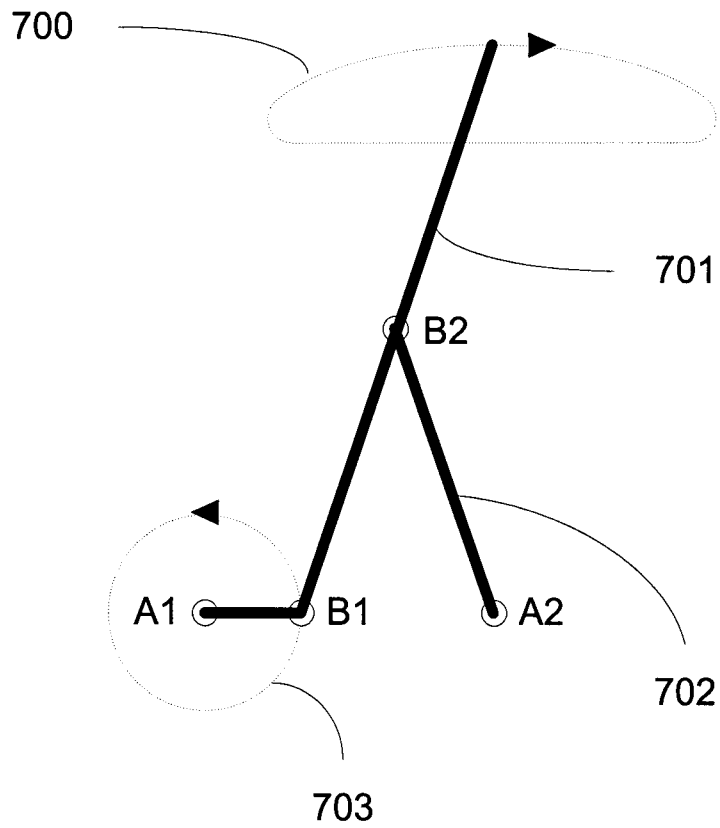
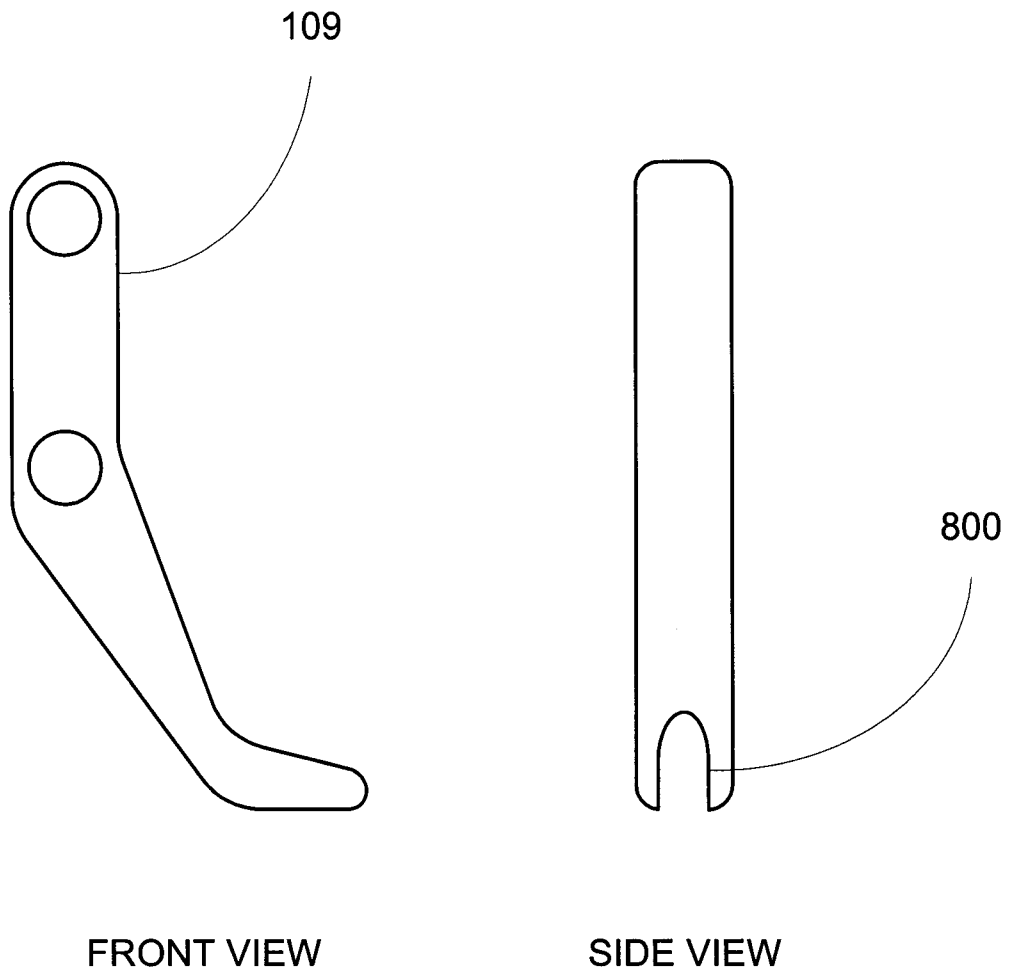


Fig. 8 -- Jaw detail
(Not to Scale)



Configuration 1 Open with Cassette

