

WO 2006/137979 A2



European (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

Published:

- *without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report*

WIDEBAND ACTIVE-PASSIVE DIFFERENTIAL SIGNAL PROBE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional App. No. 60/690,109, filed Jun. 13, 2005 and U.S. Provisional App. No. 60/739,397, filed Nov. 23, 2005.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to systems for measuring the characteristics of integrated circuits and other electronic devices and, more particularly, to systems for measuring differential signals used in conjunction with such devices.

[0003] Voltage measurements are commonly made by measuring the difference in potential between a conductor and a circuit's ground, which is often assumed to be at zero potential. While voltage is the difference between the electrical potentials at two nodes of a circuit and its measurement is, strictly speaking, the measurement of a differential signal, signaling that utilizes "ground" as the reference is referred to as "single ended" because the amplitude of the signal is represented by the difference between the ground potential and the potential in a single conductor.

[0004] On the other hand, a "differential" signal is transmitted on two conductors and the signal's amplitude is the difference between the electrical potentials in the two conductors or at two test points, neither of which is at ground potential. The potentials in the individual conductors, the signal and, ideally, its complement, commonly designated as + and -, vary around an average potential or signal, referred to as the common mode signal which may or may not remain constant. Differential signaling permits discrimination between smaller signal amplitudes because the recovery of the signal's value is largely independent of the value of the circuit's ground potential which may not be consistent within a system. In addition, differential signaling is relatively immune to outside electromagnetic interference and crosstalk from nearby signal conductors because the interference will likely produce an equal effect in each of the conductors of the differential signal. Any equal change in the potentials of the two conductors does not affect the difference between the potentials of the conductors and, therefore, the value of the differential signal. Differential signals also tend to produce less electromagnetic interference than single

ended signals because changes in the signal level in the two conductors create opposing electromagnetic fields that tend to cancel each other out reducing crosstalk and spurious emissions. As a result of the inherent advantages in signal integrity, differential signaling has been adopted for electronic signaling at frequencies ranging up to microwave frequencies.

[0005] A probe provides the physical and electrical connections between a signal source or test points on a device-under-test (DUT) and an instrument for measuring the signal. For a probe to convey a signal between a device-under-test and an instrument while maintaining signal fidelity, the probe must have sufficient bandwidth, the continuous band of frequencies that the probe can pass without unacceptable diminishment of the signal's power, to pass the signal's major frequency components with minimum distortion. With the exception of DC signals having a frequency of 0 hertz (Hz) and pure sinusoidal signals having a single frequency, signals contain multiple frequencies having values that depend on the shape of the signal's waveform. In the case of square waves and other periodic signals, the bandwidth of the probe should be three to five times higher than the fundamental frequency of the signal to pass the fundamental frequency and, at least, its first few harmonics without undue distortion of their amplitudes. However, probes used for measuring differential signals are typified by bandwidth limitations and multiple probes are typically required to measure differential signals over the broad range of possible frequencies of such signals.

[0006] Probes for measuring differential signals comprise both active and passive types. An active probe typically includes a high performance differential amplifier as part of the probe's signal conditioning network. A differential amplifier amplifies the differential mode signal, the difference between the signal and the complementary signal which are the amplifier's inputs, and rejects the common mode signal, any signal that is common to both the signal and the complement. The output of the amplifier is referenced to ground to produce a single ended signal that is generally required by instrumentation used to measure differential signals. The bandwidth of active probes extends from DC up to approximately 15 GHz, the upper limit of operating frequency for high performance instrumentation amplifiers.

[0007] Passive AC probes are required when probing differential signals having higher frequencies than those transmissible with an active probe. An AC

probe typically employs a common mode choke balun that introduces series inductance to the common mode signal path to attenuate the common mode signal and isolate the differential mode signal. However, the impedance of the common mode choke is frequency dependent and as the frequency of the differential signal decreases the common mode choke becomes less and less effective, producing no effect at DC. Common mode chokes with adequate bandwidth are difficult to build with impedances greater than 50 ohms and must be physically large for frequencies less than approximately 100 kilohertz (KHz). In contrast to the upper frequency limitation for active probes, passive AC probes have a lower frequency limit of approximately 10 KHz.

[0008] Differential signaling probes are typically expensive and, as a result of bandwidth limitations inherent in the types of probes used for measuring differential signals, multiple probes are required for testing devices utilizing differential signaling which may comprise signals having a broad range of possible frequencies. What is desired, therefore, is a probe having a bandwidth suitable for measuring differential signals comprising frequency components ranging from DC to microwave frequencies in excess of 100 gigahertz (GHz).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIG. 1 is a partial perspective view of a probe station including a wideband differential signal probe and a portion of a wafer to be tested.

[0010] FIG. 2 is a longitudinal sectional view of the wideband differential signal probe of FIG. 1.

[0011] FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of a signal conditioning network of a wideband differential signal probe.

[0012] FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of another embodiment of a signal conditioning network of a wideband differential signal probe.

[0013] The foregoing and other objectives, features, and advantages of the invention will be more readily understood upon consideration of the following detailed description of the invention, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0014] Differential signaling is used in conjunction with a wide variety of electronic devices because it can provide higher bandwidth, requires less power, and

is more resistant to interference than single ended signaling. When measuring a differential signal, a probe provides the physical and electrical connections between the signal source or test points on a device-under-test (DUT) and a measuring instrument. Testing devices and circuits that utilize differential signaling is costly because the frequencies encountered when measuring differential signaling range up to many gigahertz (GHz) and the relatively expensive active and passive probes that are used for measuring differential signals have limited bandwidth.

[0015] For a probe to convey a signal between a device-under-test and an instrument while maintaining signal fidelity, the probe must have sufficient bandwidth, the continuous band of frequencies that the probe can pass without unacceptable diminishment of the signal's power, to pass the signal's major frequency components with minimal distortion. With the exception of DC signals having a frequency of 0 hertz (Hz) and pure sinusoidal signals having a single frequency, signals contain multiple frequencies having values that depend on the shape of the signal's waveform. In the case of square waves and other periodic signals, the bandwidth of the probe should be three to five times higher than the fundamental frequency of the signal to pass the fundamental frequency and, at least, its first few harmonics without undue distortion of their amplitudes. Multiple probes are typically required to measure differential signals because the frequencies of the signal components can vary over a wide range and the bandwidth of probes used to measure the signals is more limited than the range of possible signal frequencies.

[0016] Active probes comprising high performance differential amplifiers are commonly used for probing differential signals at frequencies less than 15 GHz. The complementary differential signals are applied to the amplifier's inputs and the amplifier amplifies the differential mode signal, the difference between the signal and its complement, and rejects the common mode signal, the portion of the signal that is common to both inputs. The output of the amplifier is referenced to ground to produce a single ended signal that is generally required by the measuring instrumentation. The bandwidth of an active probe is limited by the upper limit of the operating frequency of the differential amplifier. Even expensive, high performance instrumentation amplifiers have an upper frequency limit that is substantially less than the higher frequencies encountered when probing differential signals.

[0017] A passive AC probe is typically required for probing differential signaling with signal frequencies in excess of the upper frequency limit of active probes. An AC probe commonly employs a common mode choke balun that introduces series inductance to the common mode signal path to attenuate the common mode signal and isolate the differential mode signal. However, the impedance of a choke is frequency dependent and the common mode chokes of passive AC probes become progressively larger and less effective as the frequency decreases. At DC the common mode choke produces no effect. Passive AC probes generally have a lower frequency limit of approximately 10 KHz. After considering the bandwidth limitations of active and passive probes, the present inventor concluded that a differential signal comprising frequency components that are outside of the frequency range of either a passive or an active probe could be measured by separating the differential mode signal into higher and lower frequency components, converting the higher and lower frequency components of the differential mode signal into single ended, higher and lower frequency signal components and combining the single ended, higher and lower frequency components.

[0018] Referring in detail to the drawings where similar parts are identified by like reference numerals and, more particularly to FIGS. 1 and 2, a wideband differential signal probe 20 is designed to be mounted on a probe-supporting member 22 of a probe station so as to be movable to a suitable position for probing a device-under-test (DUT), such as an individual component on a wafer 24. In this type of application, the wafer is typically restrained on the upper surface of a chuck 26 which is part of the same probe station. The upper surface of the chuck commonly includes a plurality of apertures that are selectively connectible to a source of vacuum. When the vacuum source is connected to the apertures air pressure, acting on a wafer resting on the upper surface of the chuck, secures the wafer to the chuck's surface. Ordinarily an X-Y-Z positioning mechanism, such as a micrometer knob assembly, is provided to effect movement between the supporting member 22 and the chuck 26 so that the conductive contact tips 50, 52 of the probe can be brought into pressing engagement with appropriate contact or probing pads 56, 57 on the wafer.

[0019] To effect connection to the probe-supporting member 22, a round opening 34, formed in a primary support block 32 of the probe, which, in the preferred embodiment shown, is made of brass, is snugly and slidably fitted onto an

alignment pin (not shown) that projects upward from the probe-supporting member. A screw 36 is inserted into each of a pair of countersunk openings 38 provided in the primary support block. The screws engage corresponding threaded apertures in the probe-supporting member to secure the probe to the supporting member.

[0020] The exemplary wideband probe 20 has a signal transmission port which, in the preferred embodiment depicted, comprises a K-connector 30. This connector enables an ordinary coaxial cable 58 to be connected to the probe providing a shielded high frequency transmission channel between the probe and the external signal conditioning circuitry or instrumentation. In the embodiment depicted, the coaxial cable is connected to an external signal conditioning module 60 that includes signal conditioning circuitry and a similar coaxial cable 62 connects the signal conditioning module to a measuring instrument 64, such as an oscilloscope. On the other hand, the signal conditioning circuit might be incorporated into the body of the probe and probe's port could be connected directly to the instrument. If desired and suitable, other types of conductors and connectors can be used for conducting signals, such as a 2.4 mm connector, a 1.85 mm connector or a 1 mm connector. On the other hand, a waveguide may be used to connect the probe to the signal conditioning module or the instrumentation.

[0021] A semi-rigid coaxial cable 40 is retained in the primary support block 32 and is connected, within the block, to the K-connector 30. Before being connected to the K-connector, the cable 40 is bent along first and second intermediate portions 44 and 45 in the manner illustrated in FIG. 2 so that an upwardly curving 90° bend and a downwardly curving 23° bend are formed in the cable. The rearward end of the cable 40 is attached to the K-connector while the forward end 48 of the cable 40 is passed through a passage 66 in the primary support block and remains freely suspended and, in this condition, serves as a movable support for the probing end 31 of the probe. At the probing end 31 of the exemplary wideband probe 20, a first conductive finger 50 is conductively connected to the inner conductor of the cable and, at least one, second conductive finger 52 is conductively connected to the outer conductor so as to provide respective paths for the conduction of a signal and a complementary signal, making up a differential signal, from respective probing pads 56, 57 on the DUT to the signal conditioning module 60. Additional shielding

47, such as microwave absorbing material, may be applied to the forward end 48 of the cable.

[0022] Referring to FIG. 3, the wideband differential probe 20 includes a first embodiment of a signal conditioning network 100 which may be included in the measuring instrument, a separate signal conditioning module 60 or mounted on the body of the probe. A differential signal comprises a differential mode signal, the difference between the amplitude of the signal and the amplitude of the complementary signal, and a common mode signal, the portion of the differential signal's value that is common to both the signal and its complement. The conductive contact tips 50, 52 conducting, respectively, the signal and the complement are connected to respective inputs of a common mode choke 102. The common mode signal is attenuated by the common mode choke because the core of the common mode choke is energized by the common mode signal but not by the differential mode signal and because the input impedance of the choke is high for the common mode signal and substantially less for the differential mode signal. However, the impedance of a choke is frequency dependent and as the signal frequency is reduced the common mode choke has progressively less effect on the common mode signal, producing no effect at DC. Higher frequency common mode signals are attenuated by the common mode choke, separating the differential mode signal and the lower frequency common mode signal from the differential input signal.

[0023] A diplexer 104 comprising a high pass filter in parallel with a low pass filter separates the output of the common mode choke 102 into higher frequency and lower frequency components. The low pass filter of the diplexer 104 comprises parallel inductors 106, 108 connecting respective outputs of the common mode choke and the inverting 110 and non-inverting 112 inputs of a differential amplifier 114. The inductors 106, 108 block higher frequency components of the output of the common mode choke and conduct lower frequency components to the respective inputs of the amplifier 114. For a smooth transition between the active and passive signal paths, the differential amplifier should have both a well defined termination impedance and the ability to drive a 50 ohm load through the passive summing network of a resistive combiner. The differential amplifier 114 rejects the common mode component of the input to separate the lower frequency differential mode signals from the signals at its inputs. The amplitude of the differential mode signal

controls the output of the differential amplifier but the load, powered by the output, receives its current from the DC power source 116 for the amplifier. As a result, the amplifier outputs a single ended, lower frequency signal component to a resistive combiner 117 that is conductively connected to the amplifier's output.

[0024] The parallel high pass filter of the diplexer 104 comprises capacitors 118, 120 connected to the outputs of the common mode choke 102. The high pass filter provides a signal path from the non-inverting input 110 of the differential amplifier to the resistive combiner 117 for the higher frequency components of the output of the common mode choke. The higher frequency components of the choke's output comprise the higher frequency portions of the differential mode signal. The high frequency signal is referenced to ground 122 through the capacitor 120 connected to the inverting input 112 of the amplifier 114 to convert the differential mode signal to a single ended signal that is summed with the single ended, lower frequency output of the differential amplifier to produce an output signal at terminals 124 for transmission to the measuring instrumentation.

[0025] Attenuators 126, 128 in the conductive connection from the non-inverting input of the amplifier to the resistive combiner and at the output of the differential amplifier reduce the loop gain in the high frequency signal path to less than unity to prevent feedback around the differential amplifier and signal oscillation.

[0026] Referring to FIG. 4, another embodiment of a signal conditioning network 200 for a wideband differential signal probe provides a low frequency signal path that includes an instrumentation amplifier 202 and a high frequency signal path that includes a single ended, distributed amplifier 204.

[0027] The higher frequency, common mode signal component of the differential input signal at the contact tips 50, 52 is attenuated by a common mode choke 102. The output of the common mode choke comprises a lower frequency common mode component of the input signal and the differential mode component of the input signal. A differential diplexer 206 separates the signal output of the common mode choke 102 into higher and lower frequency components. Parallel inductors 208, 210 of the diplexer block the higher frequency components of the common mode choke output and permit the lower frequency components of the signal to be conducted to the inputs of the instrumentation amplifier 202. The parallel capacitors 212 of the diplexer block lower frequency components of the common

mode choke output but allow the higher frequency components of the signal to be transmitted to the distributed amplifier 204.

[0028] The low frequency signal path comprises, generally, the instrumentation amplifier 202 including a differential amplifier 214 and input buffer amplifiers 216, 218 and an output amplifier 284. The low frequency output of the diplexer is applied to the non-inverting inputs of the buffering amplifiers which provide a high input impedance for the instrumentation amplifier. The input impedance for the differential mode signal component can be adjusted by varying the input termination resistance 220 conductively connecting the inputs of the instrumentation amplifier. The input impedance for the common mode signal can be selected by varying the resistance the termination resistors 222, 224 connecting the respective inputs of the instrumentation amplifier to ground. The differential amplifier 214 rejects the common mode component of the instrumentation amplifier input to isolate the lower frequency differential mode portion of the probe's input signal. To increase the power and enable relatively large voltage swings in the output of the low frequency signal path, the output of the differential amplifier 214 is interconnected to an output amplifier 284.

[0029] The parallel capacitors 212 of the diplexer 206 block transmission of the low frequency portion of the output of the common mode choke but permit the high frequency differential mode component of the signal to be conducted to a wideband distributed amplifier 204. The distributed amplifier comprises parallel, input 252 and output 254 transmissions lines; preferably, 50 ohm microstrips. The input and output transmission lines are tapped at a plurality of points along their length by signal paths that connect the transmission lines. The signal paths comprise transistors 256 typically having a gate connected to the input transmission line and a drain connected to the output transmission line. The traveling wave 260 on the input transmission line is amplified at each signal path by its respective transistor. The incident wave 262 on the output transmission line travels in synchronization with the traveling wave on the input line. To avoid reflections, the traveling waves on the input and output lines are absorbed by terminations, through resistors 264, 266, respectively, matched to the loaded characteristic impedance of the input transmission line and the output transmission line. Each transistor adds power, in phase with the signal, at each tap point along the output line. The distributed amplifier is capable of

a higher gain-bandwidth product than a lumped amplifier because each signal path contributes some gain to the output.

[0030] The input impedance of the distributed amplifier to high frequency differential signal can be adjusted by selecting the resistances of the resistors incorporated in a high frequency differential input attenuator 286. Independent adjustment of the high and low frequency termination impedance and the differential input attenuator enable balancing of the performance of the high and low frequency signal paths to optimize performance of the signal conditioning network at the cross-over between the signaling paths.

[0031] The outputs of the high frequency signal path and the low frequency signal path are combined in a resistive combiner 280 to provide the wideband probe's output 282 to a measuring instrument.

[0032] The wideband probe enables probing of differential signals comprising frequencies ranging from DC to microwave frequencies with a single probe. In addition, since the active and passive elements of the hybrid active-passive wideband probe are complementary, neither the common mode choke nor the differential amplifier must be designed to operate at the extremes of the operating frequency for the respective type of device. Therefore, smaller and lower cost chokes and lower cost differential amplifiers can be used in the hybrid probe while increasing bandwidth of the probe. Incorporating amplifiers in both the high and the low frequency signal paths enables the gain from the input to the output of the signal conditioning network to be unity or greater, reduces feedback around the low-frequency amplifier and enables the sensitivity to be set before the signal is amplified and amplifier noise is acquired.

[0033] The detailed description, above, sets forth numerous specific details to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the present invention may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well known methods, procedures, components, and circuitry have not been described in detail to avoid obscuring the present invention.

[0034] All the references cited herein are incorporated by reference.

[0035] The terms and expressions that have been employed in the foregoing specification are used as terms of description and not of limitation, and there is no

intention, in the use of such terms and expressions, of excluding equivalents of the features shown and described or portions thereof, it being recognized that the scope of the invention is defined and limited only by the claims that follow.

CLAIM(S)

I claim:

1. A method for probing a differential signal comprising at least one of a higher frequency component, including at least one of a higher frequency common mode signal and a higher frequency differential mode signal, and a lower frequency component, including at least one of a lower frequency common mode signal and a lower frequency differential mode signal, said method comprising the steps of:
 - (a) converting said differential signal to at least one of a higher frequency single ended signal and a lower frequency single ended signal; and
 - (b) combining said higher frequency single ended signal and said lower frequency single ended signal.
2. The method for probing a differential signal of claim 1 wherein the step of converting said differential signal to at least one of a higher frequency single ended signal and a lower frequency single ended signal comprises the steps of:
 - (a) attenuating said higher frequency common mode signal;
 - (b) referencing said higher frequency differential mode signal to a ground potential;
 - (c) attenuating said lower frequency common mode signal, and
 - (d) referencing said lower frequency differential mode signal to said ground potential.
3. A hybrid probe for measuring a differential signal comprising at least one of a higher frequency component, including at least one of a higher frequency common mode signal and a higher frequency differential mode signal, and a lower frequency component, including at least one of a lower frequency common mode signal and a lower frequency differential mode signal, said method comprising the steps of:
 - (a) a higher frequency signal path to separate said higher frequency differential mode signal from said higher frequency common mode signal and convert said higher frequency differential mode signal to a higher frequency single ended signal;

- (b) a lower frequency signal path to separate said lower frequency differential mode signal from said lower frequency common mode signal and convert said lower frequency differential mode signal to a lower frequency single ended signal; and
 - (c) a combiner to combine said higher frequency single ended signal and said lower frequency single ended signal.
4. A probe for measuring a differential signal comprising at least one of a higher frequency component, including at least one of a higher frequency common mode signal and a higher frequency differential mode signal, and a lower frequency component, including at least one of a lower frequency common mode signal and a lower frequency differential mode signal, said method comprising the steps of:
- (a) a choke attenuating said higher frequency common mode signal of said differential signal and having a choke output comprising at least one of said higher frequency differential mode signal and said lower frequency component of said differential signal;
 - (b) a first filter blocking said higher frequency differential mode signal of said choke output and transmitting said lower frequency component of said choke output;
 - (c) a differential amplifier attenuating said lower frequency common mode signal of said lower frequency component transmitted by said first filter and converting said lower frequency differential mode signal to a single ended, lower frequency signal;
 - (d) a second filter blocking transmission of said lower frequency component of said common mode choke output and transmitting a higher frequency single ended signal corresponding to said higher frequency differential mode signal; and
 - (e) a combiner to combine said single ended, lower frequency signal and said single ended, higher frequency signal.
5. The probe of claim 4 wherein a loop gain of said differential amplifier is less than unity.

6. The probe of claim 4 further comprising:
 - (a) a first attenuator conductively connected to said combiner and to an input of said differential amplifier; and
 - (b) a second attenuator conductively connected to said combiner and to an output of said differential amplifier.

7. A probe for measuring a differential signal comprising at least one of a higher frequency component, including at least one of a higher frequency common mode signal and a higher frequency differential mode signal, and a lower frequency component, including at least one of a lower frequency common mode signal and a lower frequency differential mode signal, said method comprising the steps of:
 - (a) a choke attenuating said higher frequency common mode signal of said differential signal and having a choke output comprising at least one of said higher frequency differential mode signal and said lower frequency component of said differential signal;
 - (b) a first filter blocking said higher frequency differential mode signal of said choke output and transmitting said lower frequency component of said choke output;
 - (c) a differential amplifier attenuating said lower frequency common mode signal of said lower frequency component transmitted by said first filter and converting said lower frequency differential mode signal to a single ended, lower frequency signal;
 - (d) a second filter blocking transmission of said lower frequency component of said common mode choke output and transmitting said higher frequency differential mode signal;
 - (e) a distributed amplifier receiving said higher frequency differential mode signal and outputting a single ended higher frequency signal; and
 - (f) a combiner to combine said single ended, lower frequency signal and said single ended, higher frequency signal.

8. The probe of claim 7 further comprising:
 - (a) a variable lower frequency common mode signal impedance;
 - (b) a variable lower frequency differential mode signal impedance; and
 - (c) an attenuator of said higher frequency differential mode signal.

1/3

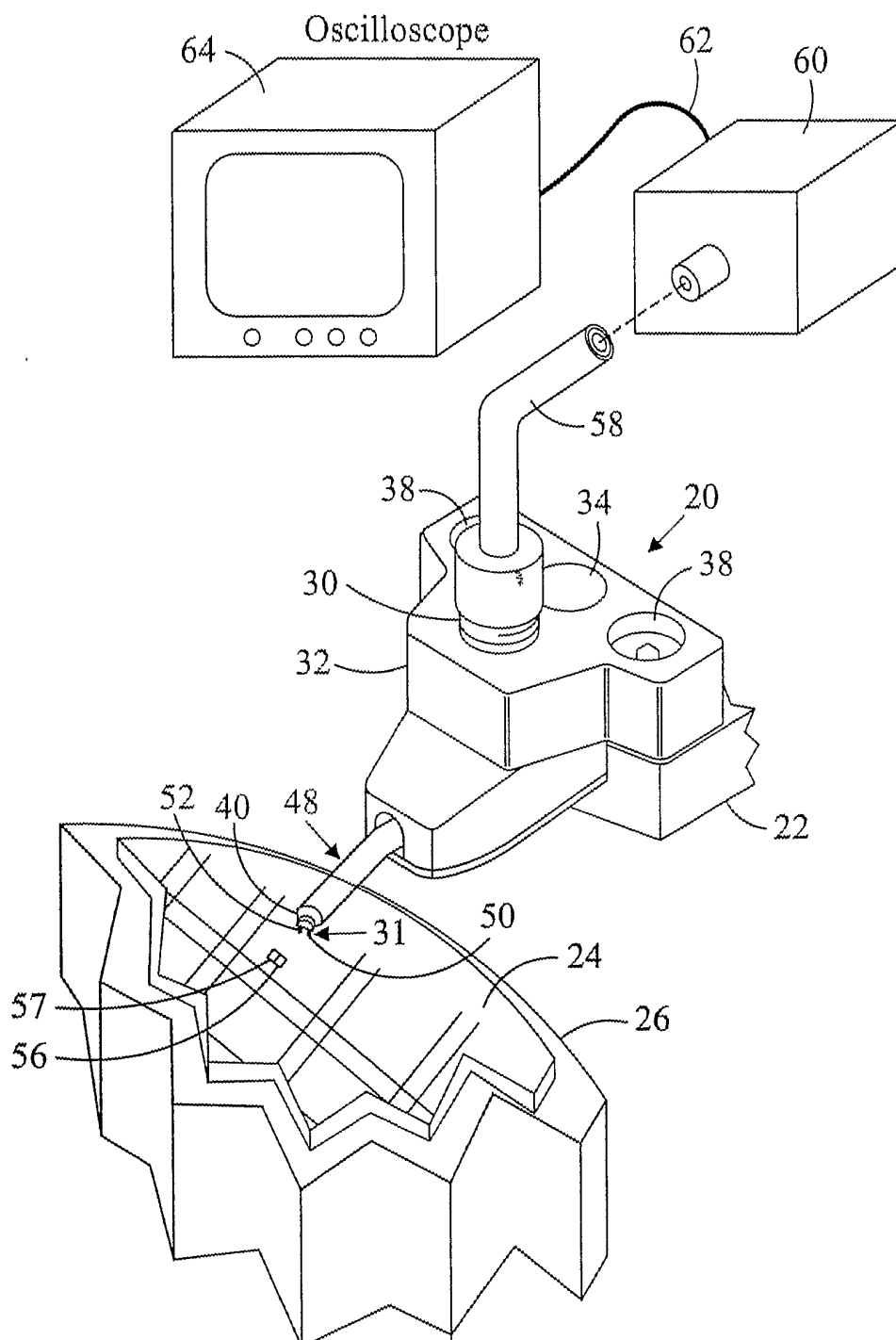


FIG. 1

2/3

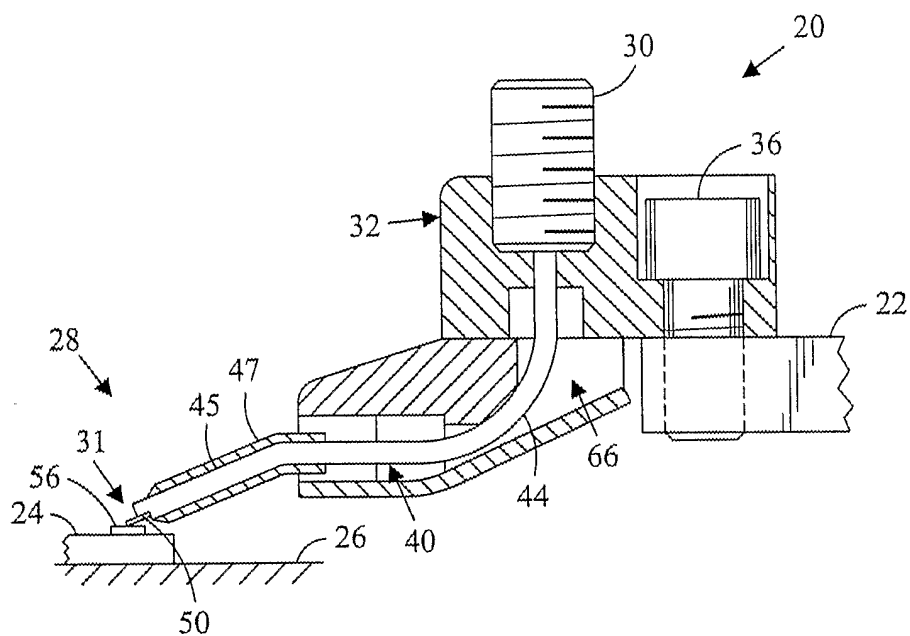


FIG. 2

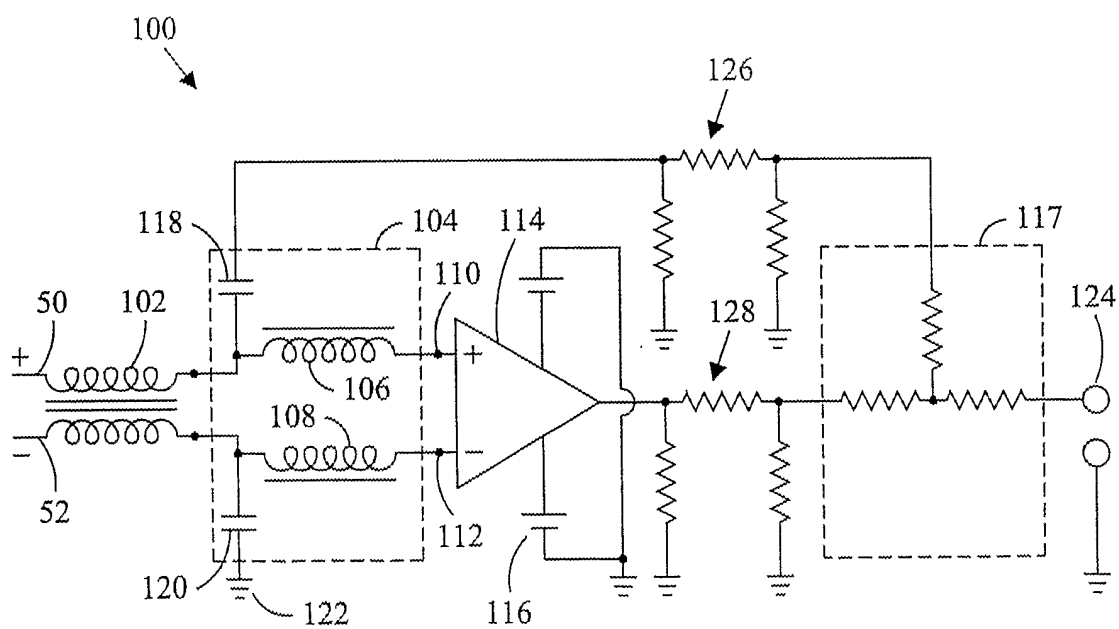


FIG. 3

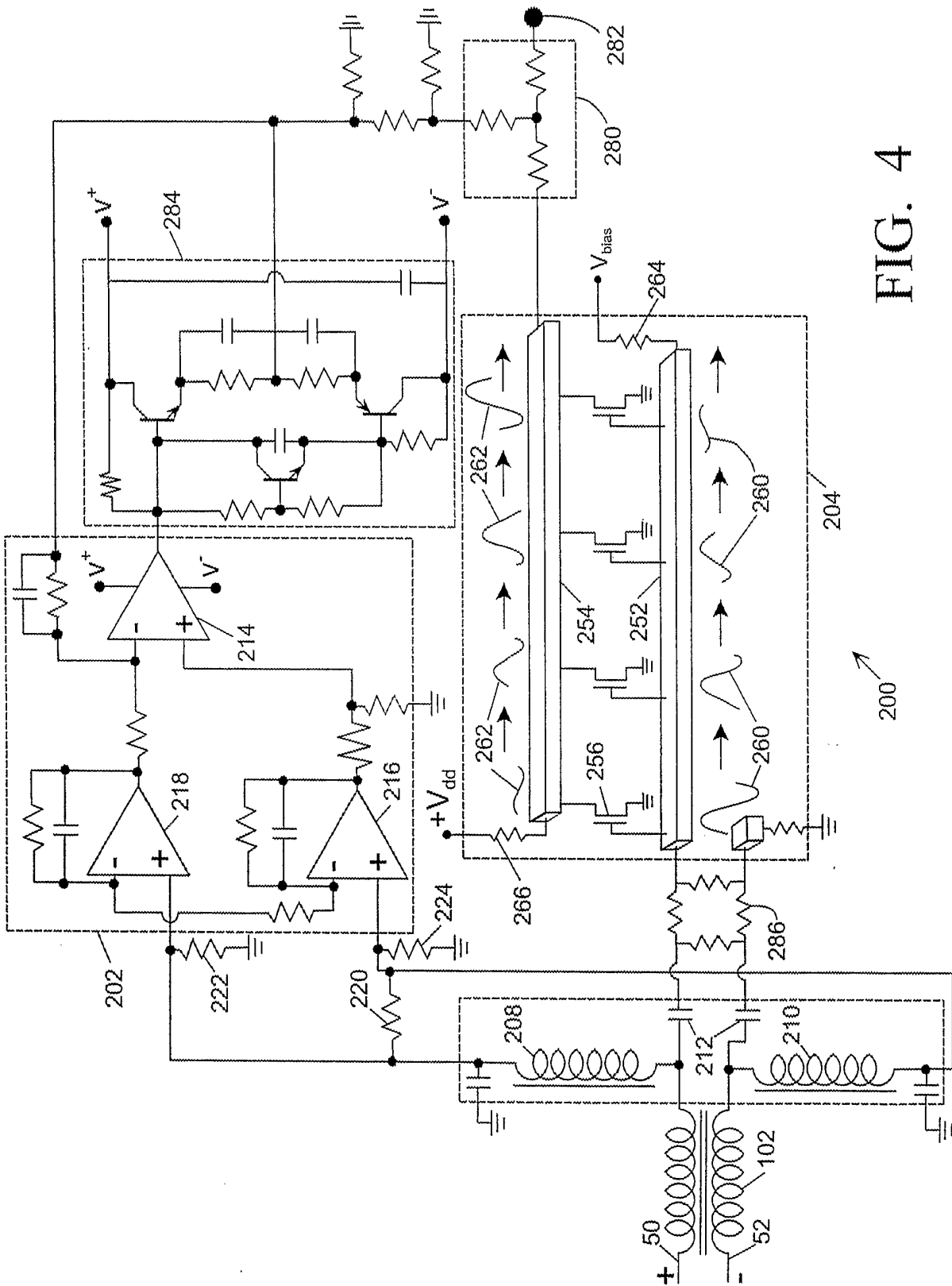


FIG. 4