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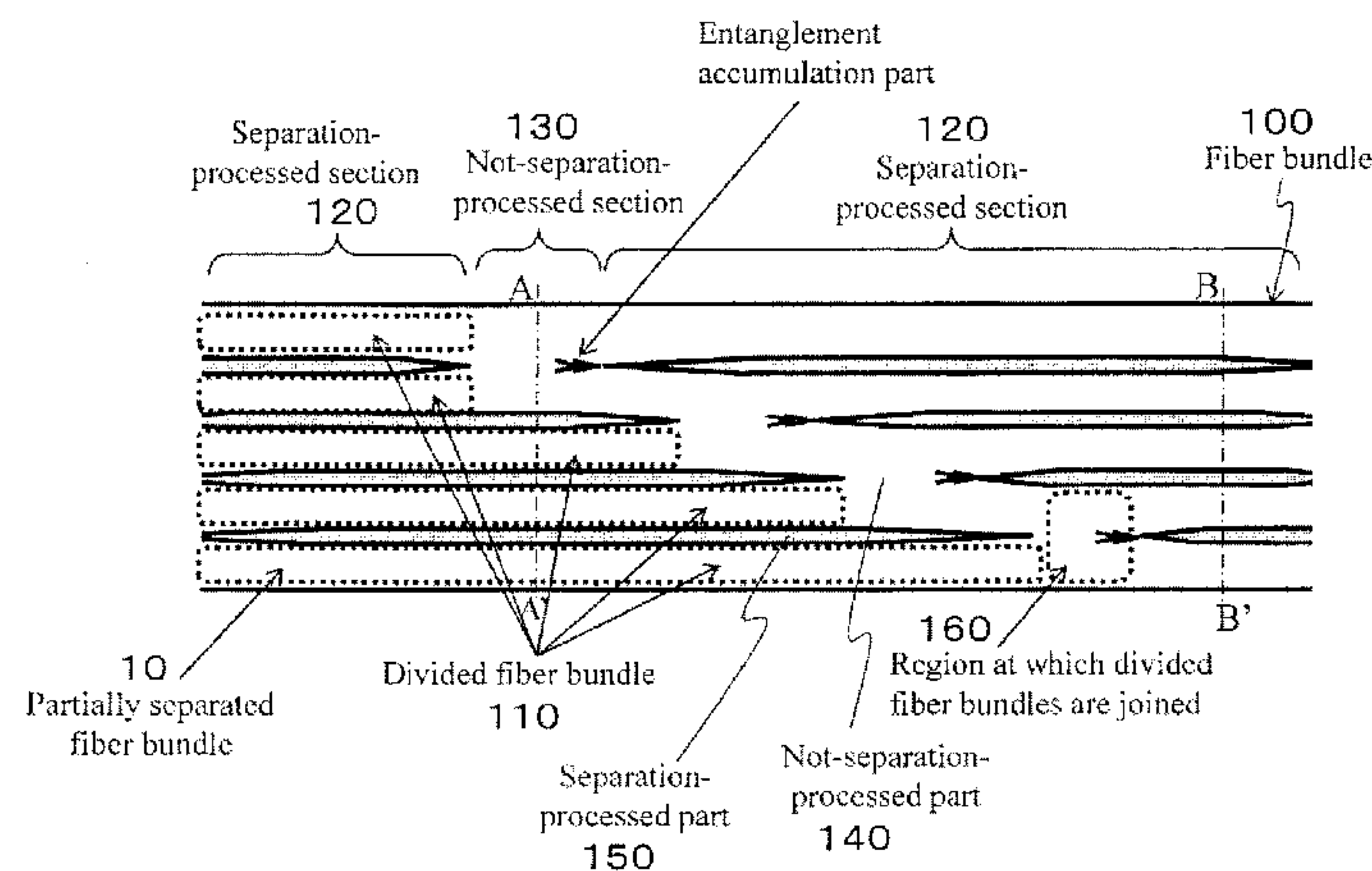
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(54) Titre : FAISCEAU DE FIBRES PARTIELLEMENT SEPARÉES, PROCÉDE DE PRODUCTION DE FAISCEAU DE FIBRES PARTIELLEMENT SEPARÉES, MATERIAU DE MOULAGE DE RESINE RENFORCEE PAR DES FIBRES UTILISANT UN FAISCEAU DE FIBRES PARTIELLEMENT SEPARÉES, ET PROCÉDE DE PRODUCTION D'UN MATERIAU DE MOULAGE DE RESINE RENFORCEE PAR DES FIBRES UTILISANT UN FAISCEAU DE FIBRES PARTIELLEMENT SEPARÉES
(54) Title: PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, PRODUCTION METHOD FOR PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, FIBER-REINFORCED RESIN MOLDING MATERIAL USING PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, AND PRODUCTION METHOD FOR FIBER-REINFORCED RESIN MOLDING MATERIAL USING PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE

FIG. 1



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A partially separated fiber bundle that comprises separation-processed sections and not-separation-processed sections that are alternately formed along the long direction of a fiber bundle that comprises a plurality of single threads, wherein the separation-processed sections comprise at least three divided bundles. The partially separated fiber bundle is characterized in that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the long direction thereof, no more than 67% of the total single threads in the cross-section are in regions at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part. A production method for the partially separated fiber bundle, a fiber-reinforced resin molding material that uses the partially separated fiber bundle, and a production method for the fiber-reinforced resin molding material that uses the partially separated fiber bundle. When the partially separated fiber bundle has been made into an intermediate substrate of discontinuous-fiber fiber bundles that is to be used in composite material molding, it is possible to achieve an optimal ratio and distribution of thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles and to achieve a balance between fluidity during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article.

ABSTRACT

A partially separated fiber bundle that comprises separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a fiber bundle that comprises a plurality of single fibers. The partially separated fiber bundle is characterized in that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction thereof, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section. A production method for the partially separated fiber bundle, a fiber-reinforced resin molding material that uses the partially separated fiber bundle, and a production method for the fiber-reinforced resin molding material that uses the partially separated fiber bundle. When the partially separated fiber bundle has been made into an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers that is to be used in molding of a composite material, it is possible to control thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles at an optimal ratio and an optimal distribution state and to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance.

PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, PRODUCTION METHOD FOR
PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, FIBER-REINFORCED RESIN
MOLDING MATERIAL USING PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE, AND
PRODUCTION METHOD FOR FIBER-REINFORCED RESIN MOLDING MATERIAL
USING PARTIALLY SEPARATED FIBER BUNDLE

Technical Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to a partially separated fiber bundle and a method for producing the same, and more specifically, to a partially separated fiber bundle which enables to continuously separate a fiber bundle without causing yarn breakage with respect to an inexpensive large tow having a large number of single fibers that is not expected with separation, and which can be formed into an optimum form for producing a molding material used for molding a composite material, and a method for producing the same, and a fiber-reinforced resin molding material impregnated with resin after matting the partially separated fiber bundle, and a production method thereof comprising a series of steps until the material is manufactured.

Background Art of the Invention

[0002] A technology for producing a molded article having a desired shape is known in which a molding material comprising a bundle-like aggregate of discontinuous reinforcing fibers (for example, carbon fibers) (hereinafter, also referred to as a fiber bundle) and a matrix resin is used and it is molded by heating and pressurizing. In such a molding material, a molding material comprising a fiber bundle having a large number of single fibers is excellent in flowability at the time of molding, but tends to be inferior in mechanical properties of a molded article. On the other hand, a fiber bundle adjusted to an arbitrary number of single fibers is used as a fiber bundle in the

molding material, aiming to satisfy both the flowability at the time of molding and the mechanical properties of the molded article.

[0003] As a method of adjusting the number of single fibers of the fiber bundle, for example, Patent documents 1 and 2 disclose methods for performing a separation processing using a plurality of fiber bundle winding bodies prepared by winding a plurality of fiber bundles in advance. In these methods, however, because the number of single fibers of each fiber bundle treated in advance is restricted, the adjustment range is limited, and therefore, it is difficult to adjust to a desired number of single fibers.

[0004] Further, for example, Patent documents 3 to 5 disclose methods for longitudinally slitting a fiber bundle to a desired number of single fibers by using disk-shaped rotary blades. In these methods, although it is possible to adjust the number of single fibers by changing the pitch of the rotary blades, since the fiber bundle longitudinally slit over the entire length in the lengthwise direction has no convergence property, the yarn after the longitudinal slit tends to become difficult in handling such as winding it on a bobbin or unwinding the fiber bundle from the bobbin. In addition, when conveying the fiber bundle after the longitudinal slitting, the split end-like fiber bundle generated by the longitudinal slit may be wrapped around a guide roll, a feed roll or the like, which may not be easy to convey.

[0005] Further, Patent document 6 discloses a method for cutting a fiber bundle to a predetermined length at the same time as a longitudinal slit by a separation cutter having a lateral blade perpendicular to the fiber direction in addition to a longitudinal blade having a longitudinal slit function in a direction parallel to the fiber direction. According to this method, it becomes unnecessary to once wind the fiber bundle after the longitudinal slit to the bobbin and transport it, and the handling property is

improved. However, since the separation cutter has the longitudinal blade and the lateral blade, when one of the blades reaches the cutting life first, an obstacle arises that the entire blade has to be exchanged.

[0006] Further, for example, Patent documents 7 and 8 describe a method in which a roll having a plurality of projections is provided on the outer circumferential surface of the roll, and the projections of the roll is pushed into a fiber bundle to partially separate the fiber bundle. In this method, however, because the circumferential speed of the roll and the conveying speed of the fiber bundle are basically the same speed synchronized with each other, it is impossible to control the lengths and the like of the separated-processed section and the not-separated-processed section, and it is difficult to obtain a partially separated fiber bundle with an optimum form.

[0007] Furthermore, Patent document 9 describes a special method of forming intermittently extending flow paths for facilitating resin impregnation in a fiber bundle by a monofilament extending in a direction orthogonal to the fiber bundle. However, this manner relates to a technology for forming a flow path for facilitating resin impregnation in a fiber bundle, and therefore, it is basically a technology different from separation of a fiber bundle such as large tow.

Prior art documents

Patent documents

[0008]

Patent document 1: JP-A-2002-255448

Patent document 2: JP-A-2004-100132

Patent document 3: JP-A-2013-49208

Patent document 4: JP-A-2014-30913

Patent document 5: Japanese Patent No. 5512908

Patent document 6: WO 2012/105080

Patent document 7: JP-A-2011-241494

Patent document 8: U.S. Patent Publication No. 2012/0213997A1

Patent document 9: EP-A-2687356A1

Summary of the Invention

Problems to be solved by the Invention

[0009] As described above, in order to satisfy both the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article, a fiber bundle adjusted to an arbitrary optimum number of single fibers is required.

[0010] Furthermore, in case of passing through the above-described longitudinal slitting process at a state where a fiber bundle is twisted such as twist exists in the fiber bundle itself or twist occurs during traveling of the fiber bundle at the separation step, because crossing fiber bundles are cut in the lengthwise direction, a problem occurs in that the fiber bundle is cut at a small length before and after the longitudinal slitting process and the longitudinal slitting cannot be continuously performed.

[0011] Accordingly, an object of the present invention is to provide a partially separated fiber bundle capable of forming a fiber bundle with an optimum number of single fibers for manufacturing a molding material used for molding a composite material, and a method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle capable of slitting continuously and stably into the optimum fiber bundle formation. In particular, an object of the present invention is to provide a partially separated fiber bundle capable of controlling to an optimal distribution state of thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles when cutting/spraying the partially separated fiber bundle and preparing an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers in order to manufacture a molding material used for molding a composite material,

thereby exhibiting the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance, and a method for producing the same. Furthermore, it is an object of the present invention to provide a partially separated fiber bundle and a method for producing the same, enabling a continuous slitting without concerning about the exchange life of a rotary blade even in case of a fiber bundle including twist or a fiber bundle of a large tow having a large number of single fibers.,

[0012] Further, another object of the present invention is to provide a fiber-reinforced resin molding material in which the above-described partially separated fiber bundle is matted and impregnated with a resin, and a method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material having a series of steps up to manufacture it.

Means for solving the Problems

[0013] To achieve the above-described objects, the present invention has the following configurations.

(1) A partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, characterized in that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

(2) The partially separated fiber bundle according to (1), wherein the length of each of the separation-processed sections is 30 mm or more and 1,500 mm or less

(3) The partially separated fiber bundle according to (1) or (2), wherein the length of each of the not-separation-processed sections is 1 mm or more and 150 mm or less.

(4) The partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of (1) to (3), wherein the content of the not-separated-processed sections contained in the partially separated fiber bundle is 3% or more and 50% or less.

(5) A method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed, wherein, while a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers is traveled along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, a separation means provided with a plurality of projected parts is penetrated into the fiber bundle to create a separation-processed part, and entangled parts, where the single fibers are interlaced, are formed at contact parts with the projected parts in at least one separation-processed part, thereafter the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle, and after passing through an entanglement accumulation part including the entangled parts, the separation means is penetrated again into the fiber bundle, characterized in that the shapes of the projected parts of the separation means and the timings of the penetration and the removal of the separation means are controlled so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

(6) A method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed, wherein a separation means provided with a plurality of projected parts is penetrated into a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, while the separation means is traveled along the

lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, a separation-processed part is created, and entangled parts, where the single fibers are interlaced, are formed at contact parts with the projected parts in at least one separation-processed part, thereafter the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle, and after the separation means is traveled up to a position passing through an entanglement accumulation part including the entangled parts, the separation means is penetrated again into the fiber bundle, characterized in that the shapes of the projected parts of the separation means and the timings of the penetration and the removal of the separation means are controlled so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

(7) The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to (5) or (6), wherein a pressing force acting on the projected parts per a width of the fiber bundle at the contact parts is detected, and the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle accompanying an increase of the pressing force.

(8) The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of (5) to (7), wherein the presence of a twist of the fiber bundle in a range of 10 to 1,000 mm from the separation means having been penetrated into the fiber bundle in at least one of the front and rear of the fiber bundle along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle is detected by an imaging means.

(9) The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to (8), wherein a pressing force acting on the projected parts per a width of the fiber bundle at the contact parts is detected, a twist is detected by the imaging means, and the separation means is controlled so that the pressing force is reduced until the projected

parts are passed through the twist from immediately before being contacted with the twist.

(10) The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of (5) to (9), wherein a plurality of the projected parts are independently controllable.

(11) The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of (5) to (10), wherein the separation means has a rotational shaft orthogonal to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, and the projected parts are provided on a surface of the rotational shaft.

(12) A fiber-reinforced resin molding material comprising a reinforcing fiber mat obtained by cutting/spraying the partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of (1) to (4) and a matrix resin.

(13) The fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to (12), wherein the matrix resin is a thermosetting resin.

(14) The fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to (12) or (13), wherein the fiber-reinforced resin molding material is a sheet molding compound.

(15) A method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to any one of (12) to (14), comprising at least the following steps [A] to [C]:

[A] a partial separation step of obtaining a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a reinforcing fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, wherein a separation processing is performed so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to

the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section;

[B] a matting step of cutting the partially separated fiber bundle and spraying the cut bundles to obtain a reinforcing fiber mat; and

[C] a resin impregnation step of impregnating a matrix resin into the reinforcing fiber mat.

(16) The method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to (15), wherein at least the steps [A] to [C] are carried out continuously in a single process.

(17) The method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to (15) or (16), wherein in the step [B], the partially separated fiber bundle is cut at an angle θ ($0 < \theta < 90^\circ$) with respect to the lengthwise direction thereof.

Effect according to the Invention

[0014] In the partially separated fiber bundle according to of the present invention, since, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is controlled at a specified rate of 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section, when the partially separated fiber bundle is cut and the cut bundles are sprayed to prepare an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers in order to manufacture a molding material used for molding a composite material, it becomes possible to control the thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles at a ratio within an optimal range or at an optimal distribution state, and it becomes possible to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance. In particular, since it can be prevented that the not-separation-processed part becomes too large and the cut fiber

bundles of discontinuous fibers are distributed at a condition of thin bundles, it can be expected to improve the mechanical properties. In order to control the rate of single fibers contained in a region, at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part, at the specified rate or less, it can be achieved, for example, by adequately shifting the position, at which the region is generated, in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, and avoiding that the region is formed as a wider region by being overlapped in a same width-direction cross-section or the like.

[0015] Further, in the method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to the present invention, the fiber bundle can be continuously and stably slit, and the partially separated fiber bundle with the above-described optimum form can be produced easily and efficiently. In particular, even in case of a fiber bundle containing twist or a fiber bundle of a large tow with a large number of single fibers, it is possible to provide a method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle, enabling a continuous slit processing without worrying about the exchange life of a rotary blade. Furthermore, it becomes possible to process a continuous slitting of an inexpensive large tow, and it becomes possible to reduce the material cost and the production cost of a molded article.

[0016] Further, in the fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to the present invention, because of containing a reinforcing fiber mat obtained by cutting and spraying the above-described partially separated fiber bundle capable of exhibiting the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance, and a matrix resin, also in molding thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles can be mixed at a ratio within an optimal range or at an optimal distribution state, securely the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article can be exhibited at a good balance.

[0017] Furthermore, in the method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to the present invention, since a partially separated fiber bundle is manufactured by alternately forming separation-processed parts separated into a plurality of bundles and not-separation-processed parts, the partially separated fiber bundle is cut and sprayed to prepare a mat originating from the partially separated fiber bundle, and a matrix resin is impregnated thereinto to obtain the fiber-reinforced resin molding material, when the partially separated fiber bundle is cut and the cut bundles are sprayed to prepare an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers, it becomes possible to mix thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles at a ratio within an optimal range or at an optimal distribution state, and it becomes possible to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance. In particular, in the step for manufacturing the partially separated fiber bundle, as described above, it is possible to slit the fiber bundle continuously and stably, and it is possible to easily and efficiently produce the partially separated fiber bundle having an optimal form. Especially, even in case of a fiber bundle containing twist or a fiber bundle of a large tow with a large number of single fibers, continuous slit processing becomes possible without worrying about the exchange life of a rotary blade. Furthermore, it becomes possible to process a continuous slitting of an inexpensive large tow, thereby reducing the material cost and the production cost of a molded article. Further, in the method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to the present invention, it becomes possible to perform a series of steps [A] to [C] continuously in a single process, and a desired fiber-reinforced resin molding material can be produced efficiently and smoothly, in addition, with an excellent productivity.

Brief explanation of the drawings

[0018]

[Fig. 1] Fig. 1 is a schematic plan view showing an example of a partially separated fiber bundle performed with separation processing to a fiber bundle in the present invention.

[Fig. 2] Fig. 2 shows schematic cross-sectional views taken along lines A-A' and B-B' of the partially separated fiber bundle shown in Fig. 1.

[Fig. 3] Fig. 3 shows (A) a schematic plan view and (B) a schematic side view, showing an example of an operation in which a separation means is penetrated into a traveling fiber bundle.

[Fig. 4] Fig. 4 shows (A) a schematic plan view and (B) a schematic side view, showing an example of a movement cycle in which a moving separation means is penetrated into a fiber bundle.

[Fig. 5] Fig. 5 shows schematic explanatory views showing another example of a movement cycle in which a moving separation means is penetrated into a fiber bundle.

[Fig. 6] Fig. 6 shows (A) a schematic plan view and (B) a schematic perspective view showing an example of a case of shifting each separation-processed section in the present invention.

[Fig. 7] Fig. 7 shows (A) a schematic perspective view and (B) a schematic cross-sectional view of a separation means, showing an example of a case of using a rotatable separation means capable of independently controlling a plurality of projected parts in the present invention.

[Fig. 8] Fig. 8 is a schematic perspective view showing an example of a case of using a rotatable separation means in the present invention.

[Fig. 9] Fig. 9 is a schematic diagram showing a method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[Fig. 10] Fig. 10 is a schematic perspective view showing an example of obliquely cutting a partially separated fiber bundle with respect to its lengthwise direction in the present invention.

Embodiments for carrying out the Invention

[0019] Hereinafter, embodiments of the present invention will be explained referring to figures. Where, the present invention is not limited in any way to the embodiments of the drawings.

[0020] Fig. 1 shows an example of a partially separated fiber bundle performed with a separation processing to a fiber bundle in the present invention, and Fig. 2 shows schematic cross-sections as viewed along lines A-A' and B- B' of the partially separated fiber bundle. The partially separated fiber bundle 10 shown in Figs. 1 and 2 is a partially separated fiber bundle 10 wherein separation-processed sections 120, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles (divided fiber bundles 110), and not-separation-processed sections 130, are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a fiber bundle 100 comprising a plurality of single fibers 11 (shown in Fig. 2), and is characterized in that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle 10 (for example, cross-sections along lines A-A' and B- B'), a rate of single fibers contained in a region 160 at which adjacent divided fiber bundles 110 are joined by a not-separation-processed part 140 is 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section. Symbol 150 in Fig. 1 shows a separation-processed part, and symbol 170 in Fig. 2 shows a divided part due to the separation processing (due to the separation-processed part 150).

[0021] In the partially separated fiber bundle 10 shown in Fig. 1, the positions generated with the regions 160 where the adjacent divided fiber bundles 110 are joined

by the not-separation-processed part 140 are formed by being shifted in order in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100 (in the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle 10). In other words, the positions in the lengthwise direction of fiber bundle 100 of the not-separation-processed parts 140 in the rows each repeatedly formed with the separation-processed part 150, the not-separation-processed part 140 and the separation-processed part 150 are sequentially shifted. Further in other words, the positions in the lengthwise direction of fiber bundle 100 of the not-separation-processed parts 140 in the rows, each repeatedly formed with the separation-processed section 120 and the not-separation-processed section 130 alternately, are sequentially shifted. As a result, as shown in a schematic cross-sectional view along the line A-A' in Fig. 2, the width of the region 160, at which the adjacent divided fiber bundles 110 are joined, up to the divided part 170, becomes large as compared with the width of the other divided fiber bundle 110 which is not joined, and the number of single fibers 11 contained in the region 160 increases in this cross section. In a width-direction cross-section at any position in the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle 10, all of a case where the above-described region 160 is not formed, a case where only one region 160 as described above is formed, and a case where a plurality of the above-described regions 160 are formed, can occur, but in any case, the rate of single fibers 11 contained in the region 160 as described above is controlled at 67% or less of the total single fibers 11 in the width-direction cross-section. By such a control, the not-separation-processed part 140 is prevented from becoming too large at any cross-sectional position. As a result, when such a partially separated fiber bundle 10 is cut and the cut bundles are sprayed to prepare an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers in order to manufacture a molding material used for molding a composite material, it becomes

possible to control the thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles at a ratio within an optimal range or at an optimal distribution state, and it becomes possible to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance. In particular, by suppressing the not-separation-processed part 140 (or the above-described regions 160) to be small, because the cut fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers are distributed at a condition of thin bundles, it can be expected to improve the mechanical properties. Therefore, the rate of single fibers 11 contained in the region 160 as described above is more preferably 50% or less, and further preferably 40% or less.

[0022] Next, the separation processing used in the present invention will be explained using Fig. 3. Fig. 3 shows (A) a schematic plan view and (B) a schematic side view, showing an example in which a separation means 200 is penetrated into the traveling fiber bundle 100. In the figure, a fiber bundle running direction A (arrow) is the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100, which shows that the fiber bundle 100 is continuously supplied from a fiber bundle supply device (not shown).

[0023] The separation means 200 is provided with a projected part 210 having a projecting shape which is easy to be penetrated into the fiber bundle 100, and which is penetrated into the traveling fiber bundle 100 to create a separation-processed part 150 approximately parallel to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100. Here, it is preferred that the separation means 200 is penetrated in a direction along the side surface of the fiber bundle 100. The side surface of the fiber bundle means a surface in the vertical direction in a sectional end in case where the section of the fiber bundle is a flat shape such as a laterally elongated elliptical shape or a laterally elongated rectangular shape (for example, corresponding to the side surface of the fiber bundle 100 shown in Fig. 3). Further, the number of projected parts 210 to be provided may

be one for each single separation means 200 or may be plural. In case where there are a plurality of projected parts 210 in one separation means 200, because the abrasion frequency of the projected part 210 decreases, it becomes possible to reduce the frequency of exchange. Furthermore, it is also possible to simultaneously use a plurality of separation means 200 depending upon the number of fiber bundles to be separated. It is possible to adequately dispose a plurality of projected parts 210 by arranging a plurality of separation means 200 in parallel, staggeringly, in shifted phases or the like.

[0024] In case where the fiber bundle 100 comprising a plurality of single fibers is divided into separated bundles with a smaller number of fibers by the separation means 200, since the plurality of single fibers are substantially not aligned in the fiber bundle 100 but there are many portions interlaced at the single fiber level, there is a case where entangled part 181, in which the single fibers are interlaced in the vicinity of the contact part 211 during the separation processing, is formed.

[0025] Here, “forming the entangled part 181” means, for example, a case of forming (moving) the entanglement of single fibers with each other, which has been previously present in the separation-processed section, on the contact part 211 by the separation means 200, a case of forming (producing) an aggregate, in which single fibers are newly interlaced, by the separation means 200, and the like.

[0026] After creating the separation-processed part 150 in an arbitrary range, the separation means 200 is removed from the fiber bundle 100. By this removal, a separation-processed section 120 performed with separation processing is created, and at the same time as that, the entangled parts 181 created as described above are accumulated in the end portion of the separation-processed section 120, and an entanglement accumulation part 180 accumulated with the entangled parts 181 is

created. Further, fluffs generated from the fiber bundle during the separation processing are formed as a fluff accumulation 190 near the entanglement accumulation part 180 at the time of the separation processing.

[0027] Thereafter, by penetrating the separation means 200 into the fiber bundle 100 again, the not-separation-processed section 130 is created and a partially separated fiber bundle is formed in which the separation-processed sections 120 and the not-separation-processed sections 130 are disposed alternately along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100. In the partially separated fiber bundle according to the present invention, it is preferred that the content of the not-separation-processed sections 130 is set to 3% or more and 50% or less. Here, the content of the not-separation-processed sections 130 is defined as the rate of the total generation length of the not-separation-processed sections 130 in a unit length of the fiber bundle 100. If the content of the not-separation-processed sections 130 is less than 3%, the process stability of the separation processing is deteriorated, the flowability, at the time when the partially separated fiber bundle is cut and the cut bundles are sprayed and used as an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers, becomes poor. If the content exceeds 50%, the mechanical properties of a molded article molded using it decrease.

[0028] Further, as the length of each section, the length of the above-described separation-processed section 120 is preferably 30 mm or more and 1,500 mm or less, and the length of the above-described not-separation-processed section 130 is preferably 1 mm or more and 150 mm or less.

[0029] The running speed of the fiber bundle 100 is preferably a stable speed with little fluctuation, more preferably a constant speed.

[0030] The separation means 200 is not particularly limited as long as the object of

the present invention can be achieved, and it is preferable to have a shape like a sharp shape such as a metal needle or a thin plate. As the separation means 200, it is preferred that a plurality of separation means 200 are provided in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100 which is performed with the separation processing, and the number of separation means 200 can be arbitrarily selected depending upon the number of single fibers F forming the fiber bundle 100 to be carried out with the separation processing. It is preferred that the number of separation means 200 is $(F / 10,000 - 1)$ or more and less than $(F / 50 - 1)$ with respect to the width direction of the fiber bundle 100. If it is less than $(F / 10,000 - 1)$, improvements in mechanical properties are hardly exhibited when a reinforcing fiber composite material is made in a later step, and if it is $(F / 50 - 1)$ or more, there is a possibility of yarn breakage or fluffing during the separation processing.

[0031] The fiber bundle 100 used in the present invention is not particularly limited in fiber kind as long as it is a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers. In this connection, it is preferred to use reinforcing fibers, and in particular, the kind thereof is preferably at least one selected from the group consisting of carbon fibers, aramide fibers and glass fibers. These may be used solely, or two or more of them can be used together. Among those, carbon fibers are particularly preferable because it is possible to provide a composite material light in weight and excellent in strength. As the carbon fibers, any one of PAN type and pitch type may be used, and the average fiber diameter thereof is preferably 3 to 12 μm , and more preferably 6 to 9 μm .

[0032] In case of carbon fibers, usually, a fiber bundle obtained by bundling about 3,000 to 60,000 single fibers made of continuous fibers is supplied as a wound body (package) wound around a bobbin. Although it is preferred that the fiber bundle is untwisted, it is also possible to use a twisted strand, and it is applicable to the present

invention even if twisting occurs during conveyance. There is no restriction on the number of single fibers, and in case where a so-called large tow having a large number of single fibers is used, since the price per unit weight of the fiber bundle is inexpensive, as the number of single fibers increases, the cost of the final product can be reduced, and such a condition is preferred. Further, as a large tow, a so-called doubling form in which fiber bundles are wound together in a form of one bundle may be employed.

[0033] When reinforcing fibers are used, it is preferred that they are surface treated for the purpose of improving the adhesive property with a matrix resin used when made to a reinforcing fiber composite material. As the method for the surface treatment, there are an electrolytic treatment, an ozone treatment, a ultraviolet treatment and the like. Further, a sizing agent may be applied for the purpose of preventing fluffing of the reinforcing fibers, improving convergence property of the reinforcing fiber strand, improving adhesive property with the matrix resin, and the like. As the sizing agent, though not particularly limited, a compound having a functional group such as an epoxy group, a urethane group, an amino group, a carboxyl group or the like can be used, and as such a compound, one type or a combination of two or more types may be used.

[0034] The fiber bundle used in the present invention is preferably in a state of being bundled in advance. Here, "the state being bundled in advance" indicates, for example, a state in which the single fibers forming the fiber bundle are bundled by entanglement with each other, a state in which the fibers are converged by a sizing agent applied to the fiber bundle, or a state in which the fibers are converged by twist generated in a process for manufacturing the fiber bundle.

[0035] The present invention is not limited to the case where the fiber bundle

travels, and as shown in Fig. 4, a method may be also employed wherein the separation means 200 is penetrated into the fiber bundle 100 being in a stationary state (arrow (1)), then, while the separation means 200 is traveled along the fiber bundle 100 (arrow (2)), the separation-processed part 150 is created, and thereafter, the separation means 200 is removed (arrow (3)). Thereafter, as shown in Fig. 5(A), the separation means 200 may be returned to the original position (arrow (4)) after the fiber bundle 100 having been in a stationary state is moved by a constant distance at timings shown by arrows (3) and (4), or as shown in Fig. 5(B), without moving the fiber bundle 100, the separation means 200 may be traveled until it passes through the entanglement accumulation part 180 (arrow (4)).

[0036] In case where the fiber bundle 100 is subjected to separation processing while it is moved by a constant distance, as shown in Fig. 4(B) or Fig. 5(A), it is preferred to control a separation processing time during being penetrated with the separation means 200 (the time of operation indicated by arrow (2)) and a time from being removed with the separation means 200 to being penetrated again into the fiber bundle (the time of operation indicated by arrows (3), (4) and (1)). In this case, the moving direction of the separation means 200 is the repetition of (1) to (4) in the figure.

[0037] Further, in case where the fiber bundle 100 is not moved and the separation processing is performed while moving the separation means 200 until the separation means 200 passes through the entanglement accumulation part 180, as shown in Fig. 5(B), it is preferred to control a separation processing time during being penetrated with the separation means 200 (the time of operation indicated by arrow (2) or arrow (6)) and a time from being removed with the separation means 200 to being penetrated again into the fiber bundle (the time of operation indicated by arrows (3), (4) and (5) or by arrows (3), (4) and (1)). Also in this case, the moving direction of the separation

means 200 is the repetition of (1) to (4) in the figure.

[0038] Thus, by the separation means 200, the separation-processed sections and the not-separated-processed sections are alternatively formed, and it is preferred that a partially separated fiber bundle is produced so that the not-separation-processed sections become within a predetermined range of ratio with respect to the total length of the fiber bundle.

[0039] Where, depending upon the entanglement state of single fibers forming the fiber bundle 100, without securing a not-separation-processed section having an arbitrary length (for example, in Fig. 3, after creating the separation-processed section 120, creating a next separation-processed part 150 with securing a not-separation-processed section 130 having a constant length), it is possible to restart separation processing subsequently from the vicinity of the terminal end portion of the separation-processed section. For example, as shown in Fig. 5(A), in case where the separation processing is performed while intermittently moving the fiber bundle 100, after the separation means 200 performs the separation processing (arrow (2)), by setting the moving length of the fiber bundle 100 to be shorter than the length of the separation processing performed immediately before, the position (arrow (1)) where the separation means 200 is to be penetrated once again can be overlapped with the separation-processed section performed with the separation processing immediately before. On the other hand, as shown in Fig. 5(B), in case of carrying out the separation processing while moving the separation means 200 itself, after once removing the separation means 200 (arrow (3)), without moving it at a constant length (arrow (4)), the separation means 200 can be penetrated into the fiber bundle again (arrow (5)).

[0040] In such a separation processing, in case where a plurality of single fibers forming the fiber bundle 100 are interlaced with each other, since the single fibers are

not substantially aligned in the fiber bundle, even if the separation means 200 is penetrated at the same position as the position where the separation processing has been already performed or as the position where the separation means 200 has been removed, in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100, the position to be penetrated is easily shifted with respect to the single fiber level, and the separation processed state (gap) is not continued from the separation-processed section formed immediately before and they can exist as separation-processed sections different from each other.

[0041] The length of the separation-processed section 120 obtained per one separation processing is preferably 30 mm or more and less than 1,500 mm, although it depends upon the entanglement state of single fibers of the fiber bundle performed with the separation processing. If it is less than 30 mm, the effect according to the separation processing is insufficient, and if it is 1,500 mm or more, depending upon the reinforcing fiber bundle, there is a possibility of occurrence of yarn breakage or fluffing.

[0042] Further, in case where a plurality of separation means 200 are provided, it is also possible to provide a plurality of alternately formed separation-processed sections and not-separation-processed sections approximately parallel to each other with respect to the width direction of the fiber bundle. In this case, as aforementioned, it is possible to arbitrarily dispose a plurality of projected parts 210 by arranging a plurality of separation means 200 in parallel, staggeringly, in shifted phases or the like.

[0043] Furthermore, each of the plurality of projected parts 210 can also be controlled independently. Although the details will be described later, it is also preferred that the individual projected parts 210 independently perform separation processing by the time required for the separation processing or the pressing force detected by the projected part 210.

[0044] In any case, the fiber bundle is unwound from an unwinding device (not shown) or the like disposed on the upstream side in the fiber bundle traveling direction for unwinding the fiber bundle. As the unwinding direction of the fiber bundle, although a laterally unwinding system for pulling out in a direction perpendicular to the axis of rotation of a bobbin and a longitudinally unwinding system for pulling out in the same direction as the axis of rotation of the bobbin (paper tube) are considered, the laterally unwinding system is preferred in consideration that in that system there are few unwinding twists.

[0045] Further, with respect to the installation posture of the bobbin at the time of unwinding, it can be installed in an arbitrary direction. In particular, in case where, in a state where the bobbin is pierced through the creel, the end surface of the bobbin on the side not being the creel rotation shaft fixed surface is directed in a direction other than the horizontal direction, it is preferred that the fiber bundle is held in a state where a constant tension is applied to the fiber bundle. In case where there is no constant tension in the fiber bundle, it is considered that the fiber bundle falls from and is separated from a package (a winding body in which the fiber bundle is wound on the bobbin), or that a fiber bundle separated from the package winds around the creel rotation shaft, whereby unwinding becomes difficult.

[0046] Further, as a method of fixing the rotation shaft of the unwound package, in addition to the method of using a creel, a surface unwinding method is also applicable wherein a package is placed on two rollers arranged in parallel with each other at a state in parallel with the two parallel rollers, and the package is rolled on the arranged rollers to unwind a fiber bundle.

[0047] Further, in case of unwinding using a creel, a method for applying a tension to the unwound fiber bundle by applying a brake to the creel by putting a belt around

the creel, fixing one end of the belt, and hanging the weight or pulling with a spring at the other end or the like, is considered. In this case, varying the braking force depending upon the winding diameter is effective as means for stabilizing the tension.

[0048] Furthermore, for adjustment of the number of single fibers after separation processing, a method of widening the fiber bundle and a method for adjustment by a pitch of a plurality of separation means arranged in the width direction of the fiber bundle can be employed. By making the pitch of the separation means smaller and providing a larger number of separation means in the width direction of the fiber bundle, it becomes possible to perform a so-called thin bundle separation processing into thin bundles each having fewer single fibers. Further, it is also possible to adjust the number of single fibers even by widening the fiber bundle before separation processing and applying separation processing to the widened fiber bundle with a larger number of separation means without narrowing the pitch of the separation means.

[0049] Here, the term "widening" means a processing of expanding the width of the fiber bundle 100. The widening method is not particularly restricted, and it is preferred to use a vibration widening method of passing through a vibration roll, an air widening method of blowing compressed air, or the like.

[0050] In the present invention, the separation-processed part 150 is formed by repeating penetration and removal of the separation means 200. At that time, it is preferred to set the timing of penetrating again by the time passed after removing the separation means 200. Further, also it is preferred to set the timing of removing again by the time passed after penetrating the separation means 200. By setting the timing of penetrating and/or removing by time, it becomes possible to create the separation-processed section 120 and the not-separation-processed section 130 at predetermined distance intervals, and it also becomes possible to arbitrarily determine

the ratio between the separation-processed section 120 and the not-separation-processed section 130. Further, although the predetermined time intervals may be always the same, it is also possible to change the intervals in accordance with circumstances, such as increasing or shortening the intervals depending upon the distance at which the separation processing has been progressed, or changing the intervals depending upon the state of the fiber bundle at respective times, for example, shortening the predetermined time intervals in case where there is little fluffing or entanglement of single fibers in the original fiber bundle, or the like.

[0051] When the separation means 200 is penetrated into the fiber bundle 100, since the created entangled part 181 continues to press the projected part 210 in accordance with the progress of the separation processing, the separation means 200 receives a pressing force from the entangled part 181.

[0052] As aforementioned, a plurality of single fibers are not substantially aligned in the fiber bundle 100 but in most portions they are interlaced with each other at the single fiber level, and further, in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100, there is a possibility where there exist a portion with many entanglements and a portion with few entanglements. In the portion with many entanglements of single fibers, the rise of the pressing force at the time of separation processing becomes fast, and conversely, in the portion with few entanglements of single fibers, the rise of the pressing force becomes slow. Therefore, it is preferred that the separation means 200 in the present invention is provided with a pressing force detection means for detecting a pressing force from the fiber bundle 100.

[0053] Further, since the tension of the fiber bundle 100 may change before and after the separation means 200, at least one tension detection means for detecting the tension of the fiber bundle 100 may be provided in the vicinity of the separation means 200, or

a plurality of them may be provided and a difference in tension may be calculated. These means for detecting the pressing force, the tension and the tension difference may be provided individually, or may be provided in a form of any combination thereof. Here, the tension detection means for detecting the tension is disposed preferably in a range of 10 to 1,000 mm apart from the separation means 200 in at least one of the front and rear of the fiber bundle 100 along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100.

[0054] It is preferred that the removal of the separation means 200 is controlled in accordance with each detected value of these pressing force, tension and tension difference. It is further preferred to control so as to remove the separation means 200 when the detected value exceeds an arbitrarily set upper limit value accompanying with the rise of the detected value. In case of the pressing force and the tension, it is preferred to set the upper limit value in a range of 0.01 to 1 N/mm, and in case of the tension difference, in a range of 0.01 to 0.8 N/mm. Where, the upper limit value may be varied within a range of $\pm 10\%$ depending upon the state of the fiber bundle. Here, the unit (N/mm) of the pressing force, the tension and the tension difference indicates force acting per the width of the fiber bundle 100.

[0055] If lowering than the range of the upper limit value of the pressing force, the tension or the tension difference, because immediately after penetrating the separation means 200 the pressing force, the tension or the tension difference reaches a value to be removed with the separation means 200, a sufficient separation processing distance cannot be obtained, the separation-processed section 110 becomes too short, and therefore, the fiber bundle performed with separation processing tried to be obtained in the present invention cannot be obtained. On the other hand, if exceeding the range of the upper limit value, because after penetrating the separation means 200 cutting of

the single fibers in the fiber bundle 100 increases before the pressing force, the tension or the tension difference reaches a value to be removed with the separation means 200, defects, such as projecting of the fiber bundle having been performed with separation processing in a shape like a split end or increase of generated fluffs, are likely to occur. The projected split end may be wrapped around a roll being served to the conveyance, or the fluffs are accumulated on a drive roll to cause slipping in the fiber bundle, and the like, and thus, a conveyance failure tends to be caused.

[0056] Differently from the case where the timing of removal of the separation means 200 is controlled with time, in case of detecting the pressing force, the tension and the tension difference, because the separation means 200 is removed before a force enough to cut the fiber bundle 100 is applied during the separation processing, an unreasonable force is not applied to the fiber bundle 100, and continuous separation processing becomes possible.

[0057] Furthermore, in order to obtain the fiber bundle 100 which has a long separation-processed section 120 and a stable shape of the entanglement accumulation part 180 in the lengthwise direction, while suppressing the occurrence of branching or fluffing like a partial cutting of the fiber bundle 100, it is preferred that the pressing force is controlled in a range of 0.04 to 0.4 N/mm, the tension is controlled in a range of 0.02 to 0.2 N/mm, and the tension difference is controlled in a range of 0.05 to 0.5 N/mm .

[0058] It is also preferred to provide an imaging means for detecting the presence of a twist of the fiber bundle 100 in a range of 10 to 1,000 mm in at least one of the front and rear of the fiber bundle 100 along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100 from the separation means 200 having been penetrated into the fiber bundle 100. By this imaging, the position of the twist is specified beforehand, and it is controlled so as

not to penetrate the separation means 200 into the twist, thereby making it possible to prevent a mistake in penetration. Further, by removing the separation means 200 when the twist approaches the penetrated separation means 200, that is, by controlling so as not to penetrate the separation means 200 into the twist, it is possible to prevent narrowing in width of the fiber bundle 100. Here, a mistake in penetration means that the separation means 200 is penetrated into the twist, the fiber bundle 100 is only pushed and moved in the penetrating direction of the separation means 200, and the separation processing is not performed.

[0059] In a configuration in which a plurality of separation means 200 are present in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100 and are arranged at equal intervals, if the width of the fiber bundle 100 varies, because the number of single fibers having been performed with separation processing also varies, there is a possibility that a separation processing with a stable number of single fibers cannot be performed. Further, if the twist is forcibly performed with separation processing, because the fiber bundle 100 is cut at the single fiber level to generate a large amount of fluffs, the shape of the entanglement accumulation part 180 in which the entangled parts 181 are accumulated becomes large. If the large entanglement accumulation part 180 is left, it is easily caught by the fiber bundle 100 unwound from the roll.

[0060] When the twist of the fiber bundle 100 is detected, other than the control so as not to penetrate the separation means 200 into the aforementioned twist, the traveling speed of the fiber bundle 100 may be changed. Concretely, after the twist is detected, the traveling speed of the fiber bundle 100 is increased at the timing when the separation means 200 is being removed from the fiber bundle 100 until the twist passes through the separation means 200, thereby efficiently avoiding the twist.

[0061] Further, an image calculation processing means for calculating the image

obtained by the imaging means may be further provided, and a pressing force control means for controlling the pressing force of the separation means 200 based on the calculation result of the image calculation processing means may be further provided. For example, when the image calculation processing means detects a twist, it is possible to improve the passing ability of the twist when the separation means passes the twist. Concretely, it is preferred to detect the twist by the imaging means and to control the separation means 200 so that the pressing force is decreased from just before the projected part 210 comes into contact with the detected twist to the time when the projected part 210 passes therethrough. When the twist is detected, it is preferred to reduce it to the range of 0.01 to 0.8 time the upper limit value of the pressing force. In case where it is below this range, substantially the pressing force cannot be detected, it becomes difficult to control the pressing force, or it becomes necessary to enhance the detection accuracy of the control device itself. Further, in case where it exceeds this range, the frequency of the separation processing performed to the twist is increased and the fiber bundle becomes narrow.

[0062] Next, in the present invention, will be explained an example of a method for achieving that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, the rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

[0063] In the example shown in Fig. 6, it is possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as described above by penetrating and removing a separation means 200A into and from the traveling fiber bundle 100. In the separation means 200A, a plurality of projected parts 210a are stood on a flat plate-like base plate 201

with a constant interval in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100 at a state where the positions are sequentially shifted by a constant amount in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100. By penetrating these projected parts 210a of this separation means 200A at the same time into the fiber bundle 100 and travelling the fiber bundle 100, the same number of separation-processed parts 150 as that of the projected parts 210a starts to be created, and by removing the separation means 200A at a stage at which the fiber bundle 100 has been travelled for a predetermined length (or a predetermined time), separation-processed sections 120 each with a predetermined length are formed at a state where the respective separation-processed parts 150 are sequentially shifted in position by a constant amount in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100. After removing the separation means 200A, by travelling the fiber bundle 100 for a predetermined length (or a predetermined time) and again penetrating the projected parts 210a of this separation means 200A into the fiber bundle 100, not-separation-processed sections 130 each with a predetermined length are formed at a state where the respective not-separation-processed parts 140 are sequentially shifted in position by a constant amount in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100. By adequately controlling the timings of the penetration and the removal of the projected parts 210a of the separation means 200A in consideration of the relationship with the running speed of the fiber bundle 100, the running time and the like, it becomes possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as aforementioned.

[0064] In the example shown in Fig. 7, it is possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as described above by penetrating and removing a separation means 200B into and from the traveling fiber bundle 100. In the separation means 200B, a plurality of projected parts 210b are provided on the rectangular block-like base 202 with a constant interval in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100, and

each of the plurality of projected parts 210b is constituted so as to be able to control the removal and penetration individually and independently. Namely, as shown in Figs. 7(A) and 7(B), each projected parts 210b is configured to be movable upward and downward with respect to the base 202, and the penetration and removal are controlled by individually controlling these projected parts 210b, the projected parts 210b used for separation are maintained at a state being stood on the base 202, and the projected part 210b finished with separation or not used for separation is stored into the base 202 at a state being removed from the fiber bundle 100. By controlling the removal and penetration of the respective projected parts 210b individually, independently and adequately using such a separation means 200B, it becomes possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as aforementioned.

[0065] In the example shown in Fig. 8, it is possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as described above by using a rotatable separation means 200C for the traveling fiber bundle 100. The rotatable separation means 200C has a rotation mechanism with a rotation axis 240 orthogonal to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100, and a plurality of projected parts 210c are provided on the surface of the rotation axis (shaft) 240. More concretely, a plurality of projected part plates 203 on each of which a plurality of projected parts 210c are arranged with a predetermined interval on the outer circumference are disposed at a predetermined interval in the direction along the rotation axis 240, and each projected part plate 203 is configured so as to be able to be controlled in position in the rotational direction independently, together with the projected parts 210c. When penetrating and removing this rotatable separation means 200C with respect to the fiber bundle 100, in the illustrated example, the projected part plate 203 having the projected parts 210c of a, b is rotated first and the projected part plate 203 having the projected parts 210c of

c, d is started to be rotated behind it. Further, in the illustrated example, the projected part plate 203 having the projected parts 210c of e, f and after indicates that it is immovable. By adequately controlling the rotation of the rotatable separation means 200C and the penetration and removal of the projected parts 210c with respect to the fiber bundle 100 while adequately controlling the position in the rotational direction of each projected part plate 203 using such a rotatable separation means 200C, it becomes possible to obtain the targeted partially separated fiber bundle 10 as aforementioned.

[0066] Where, although omitted in the figure, it is preferred that the rotatable separation means 220C has a pressing force detection mechanism and a rotation stop position holding mechanism. By the both mechanisms, until a predetermined pressing force acts on the rotatable separation means 220C, a predetermined rotation stop position is maintained and the separation processing is continued. When exceeding the predetermined pressing force, for example, when an entangled part 181 is caused at the position of the projected part 210c, the rotatable separation means 220C starts to rotate. Thereafter, the projected part 210c is removed from the fiber bundle 100, and the operation of penetrating the next projected part 210c into the fiber bundle 100 is performed. The shorter such a series of operations is, the shorter the not-separation-processed section becomes, and therefore, in case where it is attempted to increase the proportion of separation-processed sections, it is preferred to shorten these operations.

[0067] By arranging the projected parts 210c more in the rotatable separation means 220C, it is possible to obtain a fiber bundle 100 with a high proportion of separation processing and to extend the life of the rotatable separation means 220C. A fiber bundle with a high proportion of separation processing means a fiber bundle obtained

by lengthening the separation-processed length within the fiber bundle, or a fiber bundle in which the frequency of occurrence of the separation-processed sections and the not-separation-processed sections is increased. Further, as the number of the projected parts 210c provided in one rotatable separation means increases, the lifetime can be lengthened by reducing the frequency of contact of the projected parts 210c with the fiber bundle 100 and wear of the projected parts 210c. As for the number of projected parts 210c to be provided, it is preferred to arrange 3 to 12 pieces at equal intervals on the disk-shaped outer edge, more preferably 4 to 8 pieces.

[0068] Thus, when attempting to obtain a fiber bundle 100 with a stable fiber bundle width while giving priority to the proportion of separation processing and the life of the projected parts, it is preferred that the rotatable separation means 220C has an imaging means for detecting a twist as aforementioned. Concretely, during normal operation until the imaging means detects the twist, the rotatable separation means 220C intermittently repeats the rotation and the stop to perform the separation processing, and when the twist is detected, the rotational speed of the rotatable separation means 220C is increased from the speed at the normal time and/or the stop time is shortened, thereby stabilizing the fiber bundle width.

[0069] It is also possible to control the stop time to zero, that is, to continue the rotation without stopping.

[0070] Further, other than the method for repeating the intermittent rotation and stopping of the rotatable separation means 220C, the rotatable separation means 220C may always continue to rotate. At that time, it is preferred to make either one of the traveling speed of the fiber bundle 100 and the rotational speed of the rotatable separation means 220C relatively faster or slower. In case where the speeds are the same, although separation-processed sections can be formed because the operation of

penetrating/removing the projected part 210c into/from the fiber bundle 100 is performed, since the separation processing operation acting on the fiber bundle 100 is weak, there is a possibility that the separation processing is not be performed sufficiently. Further, in case where any one of the speeds is relatively too fast or too slow, the number of times the fiber bundle 100 and the projected parts 210c come in contact with each other increases, there is a possibility that yarn breakage may occur due to rubbing, which causes to be inferior in continuous productivity.

[0071] In the present invention, a reciprocating movement mechanism for performing the penetrating and removing of the separation means 200, 200A, 200B or the rotatable separation means 200C by reciprocating movement of the separation means 200, 200A, 200B or the rotatable separation means 200C may be further provided. Further, it is also a preferred embodiment to further provide a reciprocating movement mechanism for reciprocating the separation means 200, 200A, 200B or the rotatable separation means 200C along the feed direction of the fiber bundle 100. For the reciprocating movement mechanism, it is possible to use a linear motion actuator such as a compressed-air or electric cylinder or slider.

[0072] Further, the partially separated fiber bundle according to the present invention can employ various embodiments as long as the separation-processed sections and the not-separation-processed sections are alternately formed. Further, the number of separation-processed sections included in the arbitrary length region may not be constant, and by a condition where the number of separation-processed sections varies, for example, when a partially separated fiber bundle is cut to a predetermined length at a later process to make discontinuous fibers, a position where the number of separation-processed sections is large becomes a starting point for separation processing and it can be facilitated to control the division into fiber bundles each

having a predetermined number of single fibers. On the other hand, in case where the partially separated fiber bundle is used as continuous fibers without cutting it, when a reinforcing fiber composite material is made by impregnating a resin or the like thereinto in a later process, a starting point for resin impregnation into the reinforcing fiber bundle is made from a region included with many separation-processed sections, the molding time can be shortened and voids and the like in the reinforcing fiber composite material can be reduced.

[0073] Although the not-separation-processed section has been explained as a section between adjacent end portions of one separation-processed section having been finished with separation processing and a separation-processed section which is newly created by separation processing performed with a certain distance, the present invention is not limited thereto. There is a case where a not-separation-processed section is not formed in the section between the end portions of the separation-processed sections with respect to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle. Even in such a case, if the separation processing position is shifted in the width direction of the fiber bundle 100 at the single fiber level and different separation-processed sections are formed respectively, insofar as they exist as separation-processed sections each having a limited length in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, the end portions of separation-processed sections may be close to each other (substantially connected). By a condition where the separation processing positions are shifted with respect to the width direction at least at the single fiber level and different separation-processed sections are formed, when the separation processing is performed continuously, it is possible to suppress yarn breakage and occurrence of fluffs, and it is possible to obtain a partially separated fiber bundle with a good quality.

[0074] If yarn breakage is caused in the partially separated fiber bundle, when the

partially separated fiber bundle is cut to a predetermined length to be made into a discontinuous fiber reinforced composite material, the cut length becomes short at the position of being caused with yarn breakage, and there is a possibility that the mechanical properties when made into the discontinuous fiber reinforced composite material may decrease. Further, even when the partially separated fiber bundle is used as continuous fibers, the fiber becomes discontinuous at the portion of being caused with yarn breakage, and there is a possibility that the mechanical properties may decrease.

[0075] The number of separation-processed sections in case of using reinforcing fibers for fiber bundles is preferably at least $(F/10,000-1)$ or more and less than $(F/50-1)$ in a certain region in the width direction. Here, F is the total number of single fibers forming the fiber bundle to be performed with separation processing. By providing the separation-processed sections controlled in number thereof at least at $(F/10,000-1)$ or more in a certain region in the width direction, when the partially separated fiber bundle is cut to a predetermined length to be made into a discontinuous fiber reinforced composite material, because the end portion of the reinforcing fiber bundle in the discontinuous fiber reinforced composite material is finely divided, a discontinuous fiber reinforced composite material having excellent mechanical properties can be obtained. Further, in case where the partially separated fiber bundle is used as continuous fibers without cutting it, when a reinforcing fiber composite material is made by impregnating a resin or the like thereinto in a later process, a starting point for resin impregnation into the reinforcing fiber bundle is made from a region included with many separation-processed sections, the molding time can be shortened and voids and the like in the reinforcing fiber composite material can be reduced. By controlling the number of separation-processed sections to less

than (F/50-1), the obtained partially separated fiber bundle becomes hard to cause yarn breakage, and the decrease of mechanical properties when made into a fiber-reinforced composite material can be suppressed.

[0076] If the separation-processed sections are provided with periodicity or regularity in the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 100, in case where the partially separated fiber bundle is cut to a predetermined length in a later process to make discontinuous fibers, it is possible to easily control to a predetermined number of separated fiber bundles.

[0077] Next, the fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to the present invention will be explained.

The fiber-reinforced resin molding material in the present invention contains a reinforcing fiber mat obtained by cutting/spraying the above-described partially separated fiber bundle and a matrix resin.

[0078] Here, the average fiber length of the cut-off partially separated fiber bundle according to the present invention is preferably in the range of 5 to 100 mm, and more preferably in the range of 10 to 80 mm. The distribution of the fiber length may be a distribution of a single-kind fiber length or a mixture of two or more kinds.

[0079] Further, the matrix resin is not particularly restricted, and any of a thermosetting resin and a thermoplastic resin can be used, and it can be appropriately selected within a range that does not greatly deteriorate the mechanical properties as a molded article. For example, in case of a thermosetting resin, a vinyl ester resin, an epoxy resin, an unsaturated polyester resin, a phenol resin, an epoxy acrylate resin, a urethane acrylate resin, a phenoxy resin, an alkyd resin, a urethane resin, a maleimide resin, a cyanate resin, or the like can be used. Among them, any one of vinyl ester resin, epoxy resin, unsaturated polyester resin, phenol resin, or a mixture thereof is

preferred. Further, in case of a thermoplastic resin, polyolefin-based resins such as polyethylene resin and polypropylene resin, polyamide-based resins such as nylon 6 resin and nylon 6,6 resin, polyester-based resins such as polyethylene terephthalate resin and polybutylene terephthalate resin, a polyphenylene sulfide resin, a polyether ketone resin, a polyether sulfone resin, an aromatic polyamide resin, or the like can be used. Among them, any one of a polyamide resin, a polypropylene resin and a polyphenylene sulfide resin is preferred. In the present invention, a thermosetting resin can be used more preferably from the viewpoint of impregnating property of the matrix resin and applicability to the impregnating step.

[0080] Fig. 9 shows a method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to an embodiment of the present invention. In Fig. 9, symbol 1 denotes the whole of a process for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material containing at least a reinforcing fiber mat and a matrix resin in the present invention, wherein the production process 1 comprises at least a partial separation step [A] 2 for obtaining a partially separated fiber bundle 7 in which separation-processed parts each separated into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles and not-separation-processed parts are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of the reinforcing fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, and at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is controlled at 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section, a matting step [B] 3 for obtaining a reinforcing fiber mat 9b by cutting the partially separated fiber bundle 7 and spraying the cut bundles, and a resin impregnation step [C] 4 in which the reinforcing fiber mat 9b is impregnated with a matrix resin (thermosetting resin 9c in this embodiment).

[0081] A reinforcing fiber bundle 6 composed of reinforcing fibers 6a of a plurality of single fibers fed out from a plurality of creels 5 is supplied to the partial separation step [A] 2, partial separation processing is carried out in the step 2 as aforementioned, the partially separated fiber bundle 7 is manufactured. The manufactured partially separated fiber bundle 7 is subsequently (continuously) supplied to the matting step [B] 3, where it is cut into discontinuous fiber bundles by a cutter unit 8 in the step 3, and thereafter, the cut bundles are sprayed through a spraying mechanism 9a, for example, on a belt 13 being circulated, in such a manner that a reinforcing fiber mat 9b is formed. This reinforcing fiber mat 9b is impregnated with a thermosetting resin 9c as a matrix resin, and in this embodiment, the resin impregnation in the resin impregnation step [C] 4 is accelerated by such a manner that the reinforcing fiber mat 9b and the supplied thermosetting resin 9c to be impregnated are nipped films 12 sequentially supplied to both upper and lower sides of the reinforcing fiber mat 9b, and at the nipped state, they are pressed, for example, between a plurality of resin impregnation rollers 14. The reinforcing fiber mat 9b impregnated with the matrix resin is folded as shown in the figure or wound as a continuous sheet-like fiber-reinforced resin molding material 15, and thus, a series of continuous fiber-reinforced resin molding material production process 1 is completed. The fiber-reinforced resin molding material 15 is produced, for example, as a sheet molding compound (SMC).

[0082] Thus, since firstly a partially separated fiber bundle 7 is manufactured, the partially separated fiber bundle 7 is cut and sprayed to prepare a reinforcing fiber mat 9b derived from the partially separated fiber bundle, and thereinto the matrix resin 9c is impregnated to obtain the fiber-reinforced resin molding material 15, when cutting and spraying the partially separated fiber bundle 7 to prepare the reinforcing fiber mat 9b as an intermediate base material of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers, it becomes

possible to make thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles present at a mixed condition within a range of an optimum ratio, and in the fiber-reinforced resin molding material 15 impregnated with matrix resin 9c thereinto, it becomes possible to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance. In particular, in the manufacturing process of the partially separated fiber bundle 7, as described above, the fiber bundle can be stably slit continuously, and the partially separated fiber bundle 7 in an optimum form can be easily and efficiently produced. Especially, even in case of a fiber bundle containing twist or a fiber bundle of a large tow having a large number of single fibers, a continuous slit processing becomes possible without worrying about exchange life of a rotary blade. In addition, a continuous slit processing of an inexpensive large tow becomes possible, whereby it may become possible to reduce the material cost and production cost of a finally molded article.

[0083] Here, from the viewpoint that it is possible to produce a desired fiber-reinforced resin molding material 15 efficiently, smoothly, and with excellent productivity in the above-described production process 1 of the fiber-reinforced resin molding material, an embodiment is shown as a preferred example wherein a series of the steps [A] to [C] are carried out continuously in one process, but it is not necessary to continuously carry out the series of the steps [A] to [C] in one process, for example, the partially separated fiber bundle obtained through the step [A] may be wound up once and then subjected to the step [B].

[0084] Further, in the present invention, when cutting the partially separated fiber bundle 7 in the matting step [B] 3 as shown in Fig. 9, it is also preferred to cut the partially separated fiber bundle 7 at an angle θ ($0 < \theta < 90^\circ$) with respect to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle 7. For example, as shown in Fig. 10, with a

cutting blade 8a inclined at an angle θ ($0 < \theta < 90^\circ$) with respect to the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle 7 (running direction of the fiber bundle in the figure), the partially separated fiber bundle 7 is cut. In this way, the chance of the cutting line by the cutting blade 8a to extend over the separation-processed section 150 and the not-separation-processed part 140 increases, and when cutting the partially separated fiber bundle 7 to make the fiber bundle of the discontinuous fibers, because the chance that the discontinuous fiber bundle is formed only from the not-separation-processed part 140 decreases, it becomes possible to form a mat comprising discontinuous fiber bundles with a thinner size. In a fiber-reinforced resin molding material using such a mat, it becomes possible to particularly improve the mechanical properties of a molded article.

Examples

[0085] Next, examples and comparative examples of the present invention will be explained. Where, the present invention is not limited in any way to the examples and comparative examples.

[0086] [Used raw material]

Fiber bundle [A-1]:

A continuous carbon fiber bundle ("PANEX (registered trademark) 35", supplied by ZOLTEK CORPORATION) having a fiber diameter of 7.2 μm , a tensile modulus of elasticity of 240 GPa, and a number of single fibers of 50,000 was used.

Matrix resin [M-1]:

A resin compound prepared by sufficiently mixing and stirring 100 parts by weight of a vinyl ester resin ("DELAKEN (registered trademark) 790", supplied by Dow Chemical Co., Ltd.), 1 part by weight of tert-butyl peroxybenzoate ("Perbutyl (registered trademark) Z", supplied by NOF CORPORATION) as a curing agent, 4 parts

by weight of magnesium oxide (MgO #40, supplied by Kyowa Chemical Industry Co., Ltd.) as a thickener, and 2 parts by weight of zinc stearate (SZ-2000, supplied by Sakai Chemical Industry Co., Ltd.) was used.

[0087] [Evaluation method of mechanical property]

After placing the fiber-reinforced resin molding material in the central part of a flat metal mold (50% in terms of charge rate), it was cured under a pressure of 10 MPa by a pressurizing type press machine at a condition of about 140 °C for 5 minutes to obtain a flat plate of 300 × 400 mm. Five test pieces (total 10 pieces) each having a size of 100 × 25 × 1.6 mm were cut out from the obtained flat plate from the respective directions of 0° and 90° when the lengthwise direction of the flat plate was set to 0°, and based on JIS K7074 (1988), the measurement was carried out. As the mechanical properties, a flexural strength, a flexural modulus, and a CV value (%) of the flexural modulus were determined (CV: coefficient of variation).

[0088] (Example)

The fiber bundle [A-1] was unwound using a winder at a constant speed of 10 m/min, and the unwound fiber bundle was passed through a vibration widening roll vibrating in its axial direction at 10 Hz, and after the widening processing was performed, a widened fiber bundle widened to 60 mm was obtained by passing it through a width regulating roll having a width of 60 mm.

[0089] For the obtained widened fiber bundle, a separation means similar to the separation means 200A exemplified in Fig. 6(B) was prepared by arranging 16 iron plates for separation processing each having a projected shape with a thickness of 0.2 mm, a width of 3 mm and a height of 20 mm at equal intervals of 3.8 mm with respect to the width direction of the reinforcing fiber bundle, and arranging the iron plates for separation processing adjacent in the width direction at a state shifting them in the

lengthwise direction of the reinforcing fiber bundle at equal intervals of 7 mm. This separation means was intermittently penetrated into and removed from the widened fiber bundle to obtain a partially separated fiber bundle. At that time, the separation means was penetrated into the widened fiber bundle traveling at a constant speed of 10 m/min for 3 seconds to create a separation-processed section, and the separation means was removed for 0.2 second, and it was penetrated again, and these operations were repeated.

The obtained partially separated fiber bundle was separated into 15 divided parts in the width direction of the fiber bundle in the separation-processed section, and at least at one end portion of at least one separation-processed section, an entanglement accumulation part accumulated with the entangled parts in which the single fibers were interlaced was formed. Further, the rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles were joined by a not-separation-processed part, in the width-direction cross-section of the above-described partially separated fiber bundle, was 33% relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section at maximum.

[0090] When the partially separated fiber bundle was manufactured by 1,500 m, the twist of the fibers existing in the fiber bundle passed through in the traveling direction when removing and penetrating the separation means, without causing yarn breakage and winding at all, and it was possible to carry out the separation processing with a stable width.

[0091] Further, when samples were cut out from the obtained partially separated fiber bundle each with a length of 1 m, and the lengths of the separation-processed sections and the not-separation-processed sections in each sample were measured and averaged to determine the length of the separation-processed section and the length of

the not-separation-processed section, the length of the separation-processed section was 500 mm and the length of the not-separation-processed section was 33 mm. Further, when the total sum of the not-separation-processed sections in the above-described measured samples was divided by the total length of 5 m of the samples, and the obtained value was obtained as the content of the partially separated fiber bundles, the content of the partially separated fiber bundles was 6%.

[0092] Subsequently, the obtained partially separated fiber bundle was continuously inserted into a rotary cutter, and the fiber bundle was cut at a fiber length of 25 mm and the cut bundles were sprayed so as to be uniformly dispersed, whereby a discontinuous fiber nonwoven fabric whose fiber orientation is isotropic was obtained. The areal weight of the obtained discontinuous fiber nonwoven fabric was 1 kg/m².

[0093] The matrix resin [M-1] was uniformly applied to each of two polypropylene release films using a doctor blade to prepare two resin sheets. The discontinuous fiber nonwoven fabric obtained as described above was sandwiched between these two resin sheets from the upper and lower sides, and the resin was impregnated into the nonwoven fabric with rollers to obtain a sheet-like fiber-reinforced resin molding material. At that time, the application amount of the resin was adjusted at the stage of resin sheet preparation so that the weight content of reinforcing fibers in the fiber-reinforced resin molding material became to be 47%. With respect to the fiber-reinforced resin molding material obtained, when the fiber-reinforced resin molding material was molded based on the aforementioned evaluation method of mechanical properties and the mechanical properties were evaluated, the flexural strength was 430 MPa, the flexural modulus was 27 GPa, and the CV of the flexural modulus was 8%.

[0094] (Comparative Example 1)

The evaluation was performed in the same manner as in the Example other than a

condition where the fiber bundle [A-1] was cut and sprayed without being performed with widening processing and separation processing to obtain a discontinuous fiber nonwoven fabric. As a result, the flexural strength was 300 MPa, the flexural modulus was 22 GPa, and the CV of the flexural modulus was 24%.

[0095] (Comparative Example 2)

For the widened fiber bundle using the fiber bundle [A-1] travelling at a constant speed of 10 m/min, the same separation means as that in the Example was always kept in a penetrated state, and a continuously separated fiber bundle performed with a continuous separation processing was manufactured. In the obtained continuously separated fiber bundle, the separation-processed section was formed continuously in the lengthwise direction of the fibers, at a part a quality deterioration due to remarkable fluffing was observed, the twists of fibers existed in the fiber bundle were accumulated at a position of the separation means, a partial yarn breakage occurred, and it was impossible to continuously perform the separation processing.

[0096] As described above, it was confirmed that in the Example excellent mechanical properties (flexural strength, flexural modulus) and low variation were both exhibited. On the other hand, in Comparative Example 1, because the separation processing was not performed, the fiber bundles in the molded article were all thick, stress concentration occurred at the end portion of the fiber bundle, and a decrease in mechanical properties and an increase in variation were observed.

Industrial Applicability

[0097] The present invention can be applied to any fiber bundle in which it is desired to separate a fiber bundle composed of a plurality of single fibers into thin bundles each having a less number of single fibers, and in particular, the present invention is suitable for a case requiring that, when the partially separated fiber bundle is

cut/sprayed and made into an intermediate substrate of fiber bundles of discontinuous fibers to manufacture a molding material used for molding a composite material, it is possible to control thin fiber bundles and thick fiber bundles at an optimal distribution state and to exhibit the flowability during molding and the mechanical properties of a molded article at a good balance.

Explanation of symbols

[0098]

1: process for producing fiber-reinforced resin molding material

2: partial separation step [A]

3: matting step [B]

4: resin impregnation step [C]

5: creel

6: reinforcing fiber bundle

6a: reinforcing fibers

7: partially separated fiber bundle

8: cutter unit

8a: cutting blade

9a: spraying mechanism

9b: reinforcing fiber mat

9c: thermosetting resin

10: partially separated fiber bundle

11: single fiber

12: film

13: belt

14: resin impregnation roller

15: fiber-reinforced resin molding material
100: fiber bundle
110: divided fiber bundle
120: separation-processed section
130: not-separation-processed section
140: not-separation-processed part
150: separation-processed part
160: region at which divided fiber bundles are joined
170: divided part
180: entanglement accumulation part
181: entangled part
190: fluff accumulation
190: entangled part
200, 200A, 200B: separation means
200C: rotatable separation means
201: base plate
202: base
203: projected part plate
210, 210a, 210b, 210c: projected part
211: contact part
240: rotation axis

CLAIMS

1. A partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, characterized in that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part is 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.
2. The partially separated fiber bundle according to claim 1, wherein the length of each of the separation-processed sections is 30 mm or more and 1,500 mm or less
3. The partially separated fiber bundle according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the length of each of the not-separation-processed sections is 1 mm or more and 150 mm or less.
4. The partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the content of the not-separated-processed sections contained in the partially separated fiber bundle is 3% or more and 50% or less.
5. A method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed, wherein, while a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers is traveled along the lengthwise

direction of the fiber bundle, a separation means provided with a plurality of projected parts is penetrated into the fiber bundle to create a separation-processed part, and entangled parts, where the single fibers are interlaced, are formed at contact parts with the projected parts in at least one separation-processed part, thereafter the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle, and after passing through an entanglement accumulation part including the entangled parts, the separation means is penetrated again into the fiber bundle, characterized in that the shapes of the projected parts of the separation means and the timings of the penetration and the removal of the separation means are controlled so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

6. A method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed, wherein a separation means provided with a plurality of projected parts is penetrated into a fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single fibers, while the separation means is traveled along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, a separation-processed part is created, and entangled parts, where the single fibers are interlaced, are formed at contact parts with the projected parts in at least one separation-processed part, thereafter the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle, and after the separation means is traveled up to a position passing through an entanglement accumulation part including the entangled parts, the separation means is penetrated again into the fiber bundle,

characterized in that the shapes of the projected parts of the separation means and the timings of the penetration and the removal of the separation means are controlled so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section.

7. The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to claim 5 or 6, wherein a pressing force acting on the projected parts per a width of the fiber bundle at the contact parts is detected, and the separation means is removed from the fiber bundle accompanying an increase of the pressing force.

8. The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of claims 5 to 7, wherein the presence of a twist of the fiber bundle in a range of 10 to 1,000 mm from the separation means having been penetrated into the fiber bundle in at least one of the front and rear of the fiber bundle along the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle is detected by an imaging means.

9. The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to claim 8, wherein a pressing force acting on the projected parts per a width of the fiber bundle at the contact parts is detected, a twist is detected by the imaging means, and the separation means is controlled so that the pressing force is reduced until the projected parts are passed through the twist from immediately before being contacted with the twist.

10. The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of claims 5 to 9, wherein a plurality of the projected parts are independently controllable.

11. The method for producing a partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of claims 5 to 10, wherein the separation means has a rotational shaft orthogonal to the lengthwise direction of the fiber bundle, and the projected parts are provided on a surface of the rotational shaft.

12. A fiber-reinforced resin molding material comprising a reinforcing fiber mat obtained by cutting/spraying the partially separated fiber bundle according to any one of claims 1 to 4 and a matrix resin.

13. The fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to claim 12, wherein the matrix resin is a thermosetting resin.

14. The fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to claim 12 or 13, wherein the fiber-reinforced resin molding material is a sheet molding compound.

15. A method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to any one of claims 12 to 14, comprising at least the following steps [A] to [C]:

[A] a partial separation step of obtaining a partially separated fiber bundle comprising separation-processed sections, each divided into a plurality of bundles of at least three bundles, and not-separation-processed sections, that are alternately formed along the lengthwise direction of a reinforcing fiber bundle comprising a plurality of single

fibers, wherein a separation processing is performed so that, at any width-direction cross-section taken along the lengthwise direction of the partially separated fiber bundle, a rate of single fibers contained in a region at which adjacent divided fiber bundles are joined by a not-separation-processed part becomes 67% or less relative to the total single fibers in the width-direction cross-section;

[B] a matting step of cutting the partially separated fiber bundle and spraying the cut bundles to obtain a reinforcing fiber mat; and

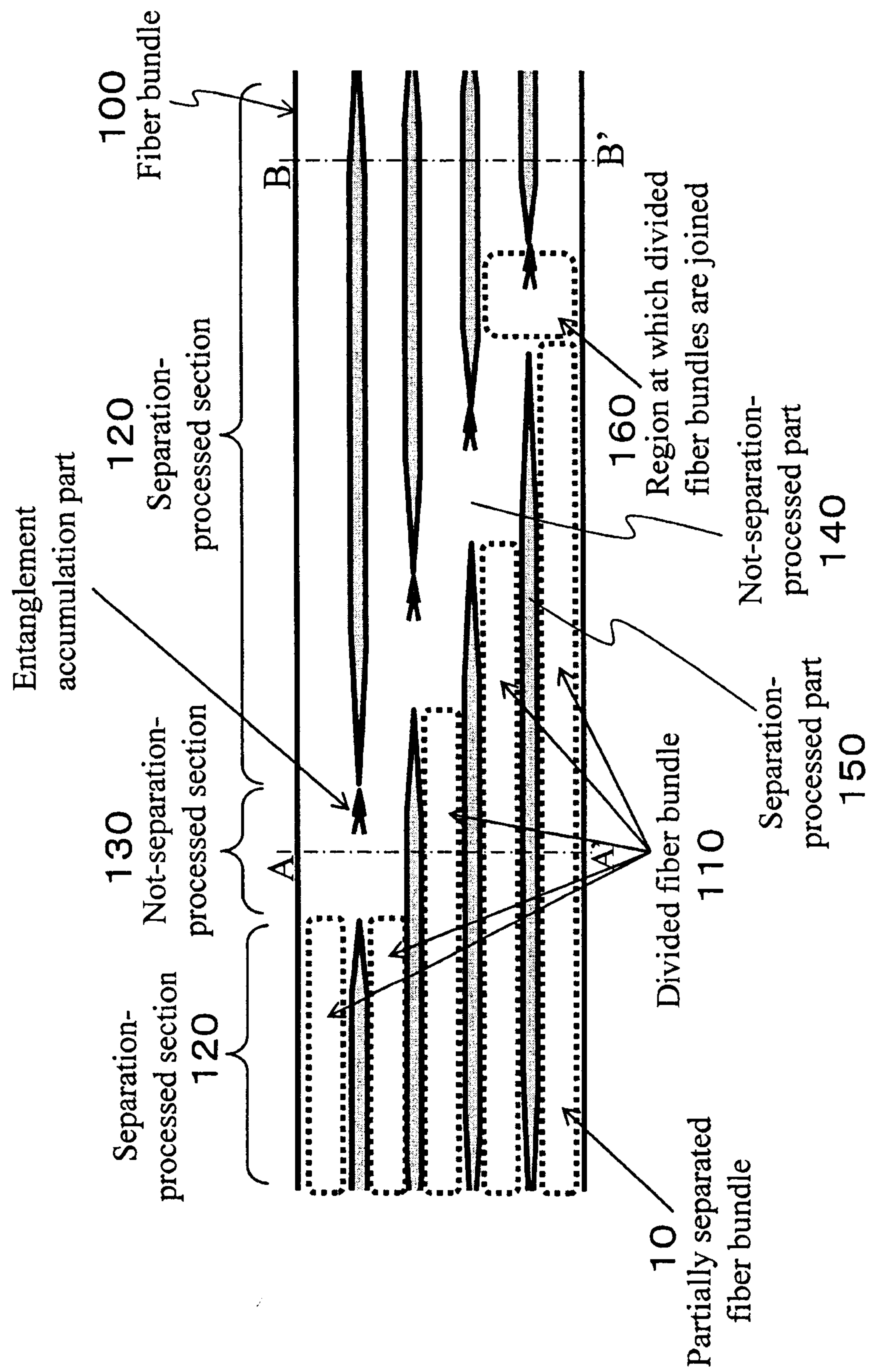
[C] a resin impregnation step of impregnating a matrix resin into the reinforcing fiber mat.

16. The method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to claim 15, wherein at least the steps [A] to [C] are carried out continuously in a single process.

17. The method for producing a fiber-reinforced resin molding material according to claim 15 or 16, wherein in the step [B], the partially separated fiber bundle is cut at an angle θ ($0 < \theta < 90^\circ$) with respect to the lengthwise direction thereof.

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FIG. 1



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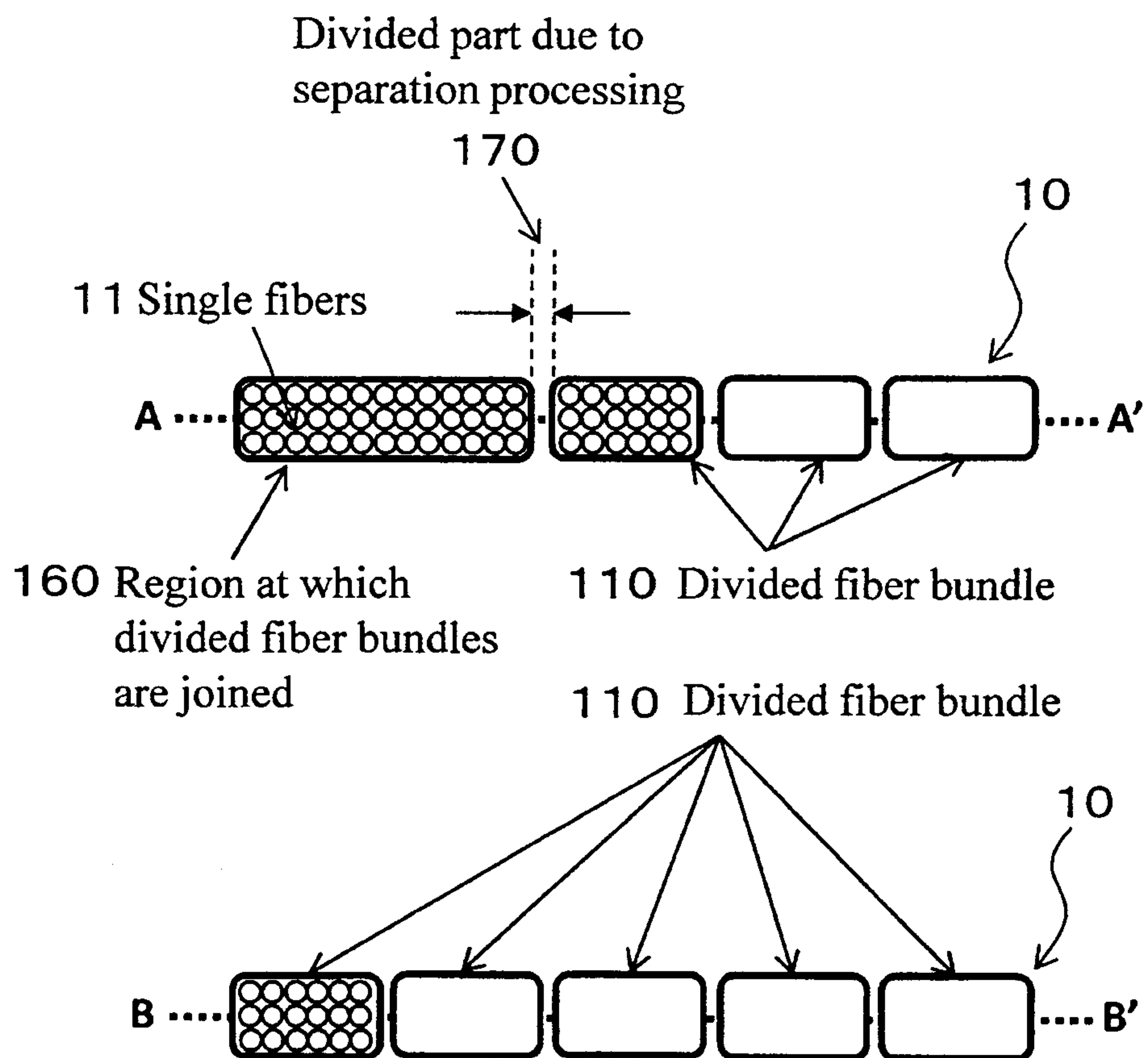
FIG. 2

Fig. 3

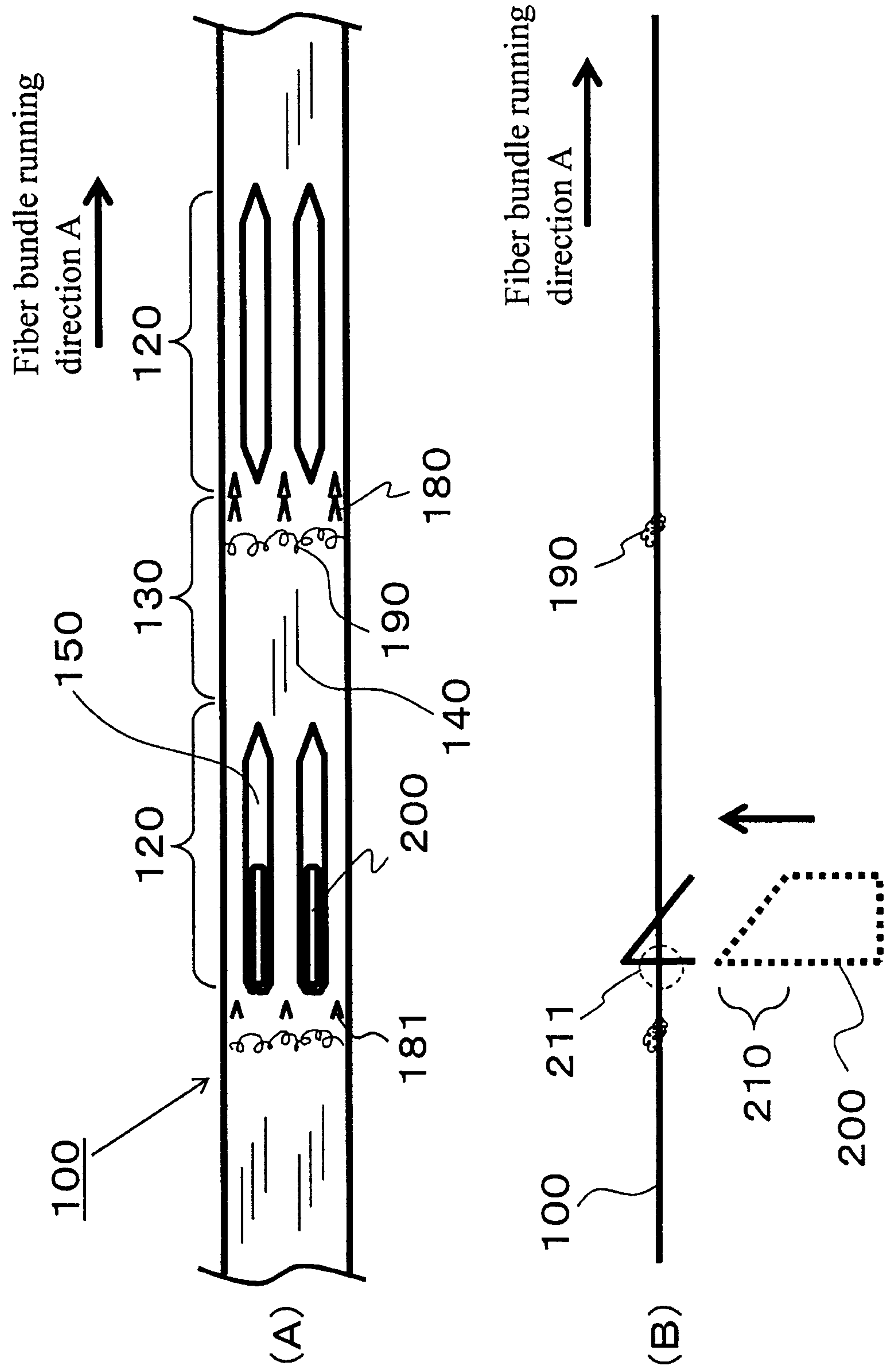


FIG. 4

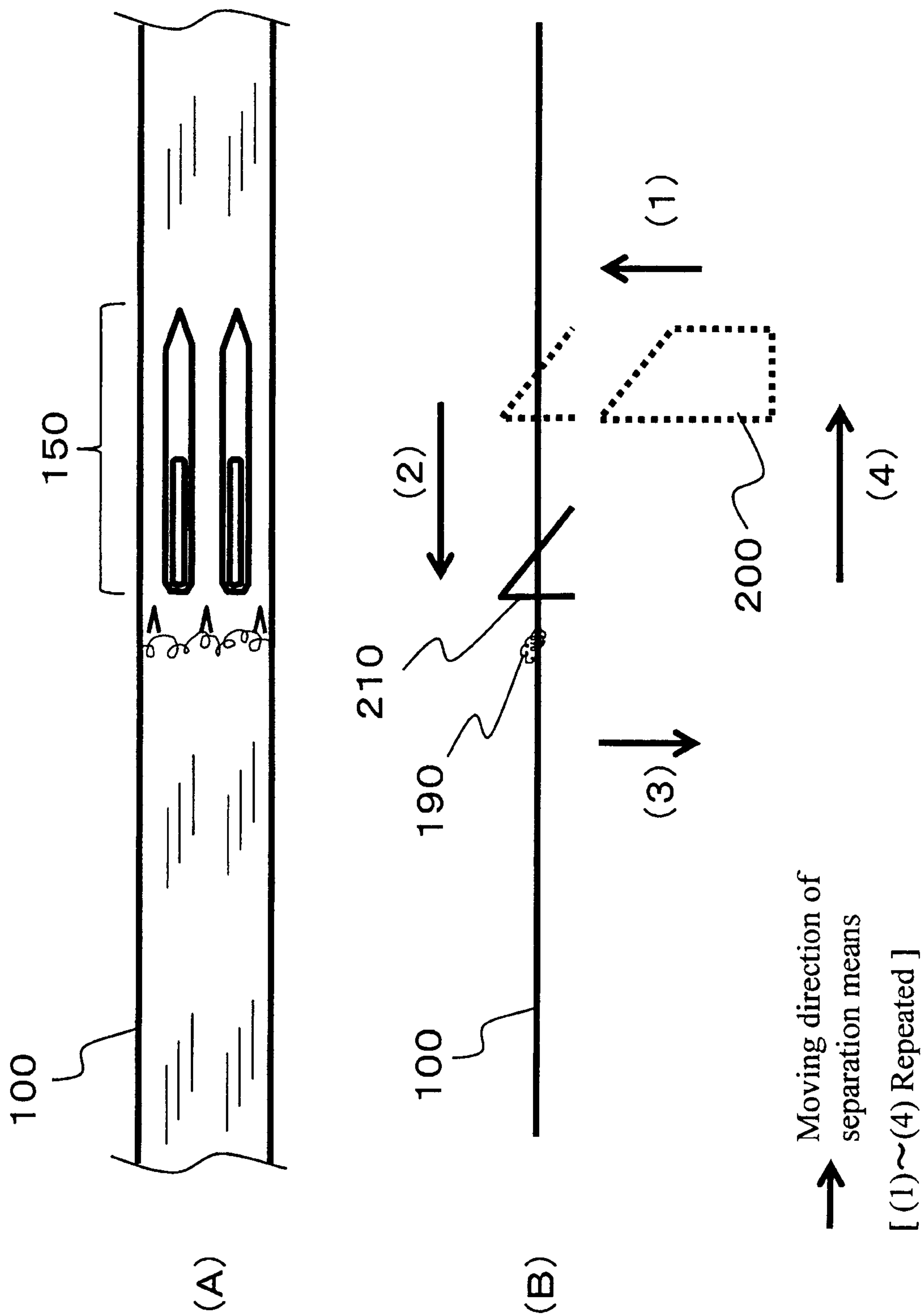


FIG. 5

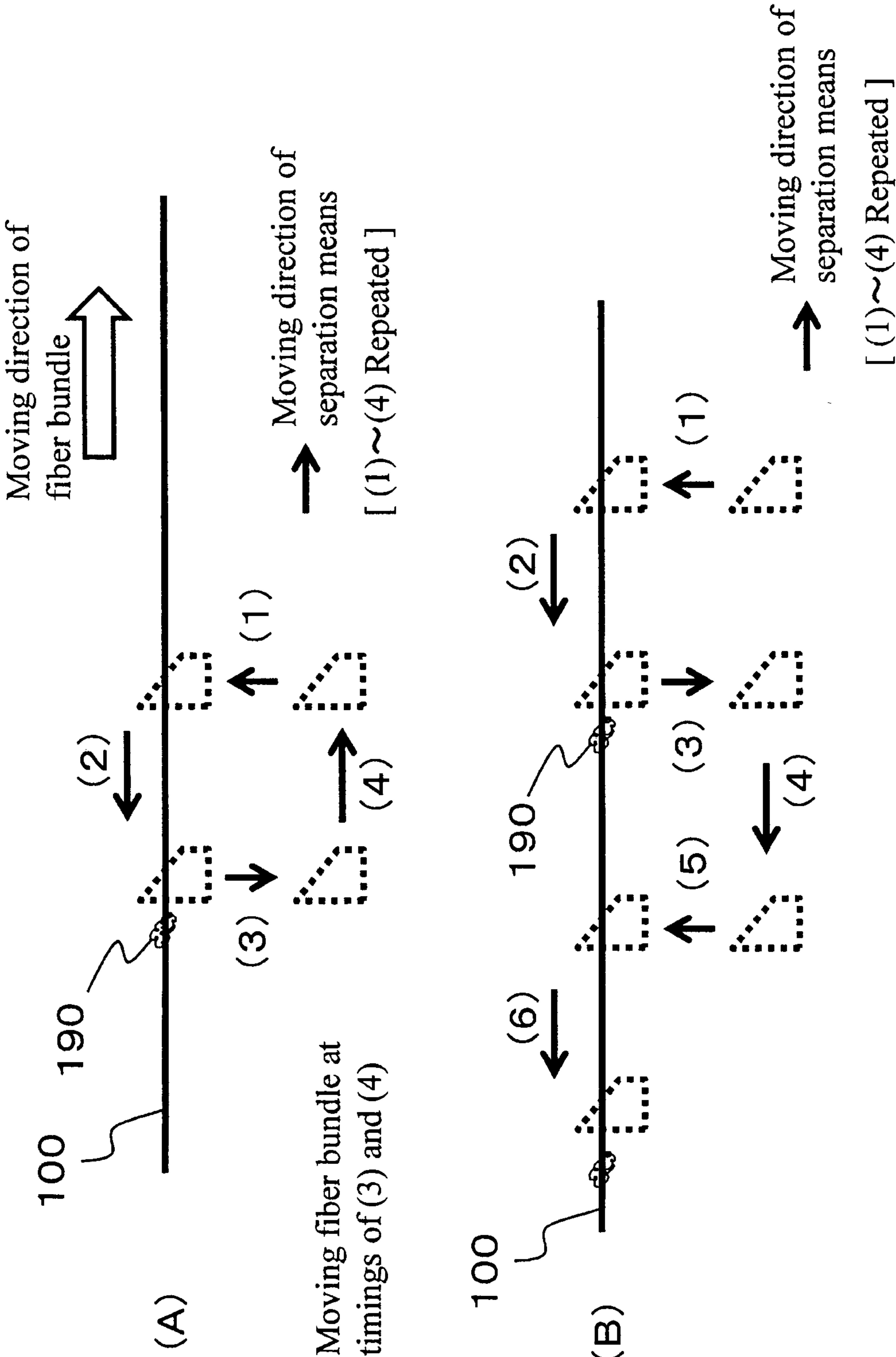


FIG. 6

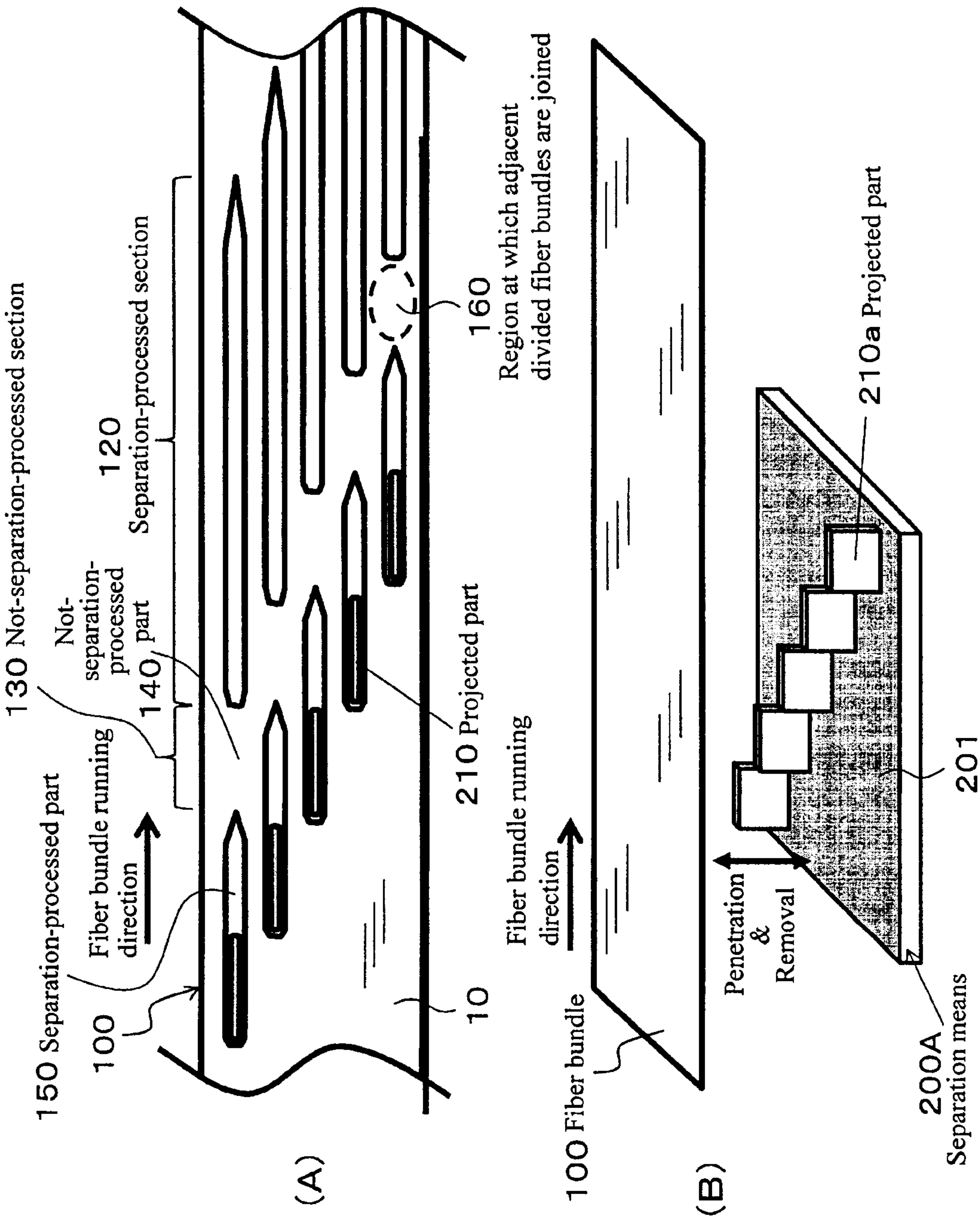


FIG. 7

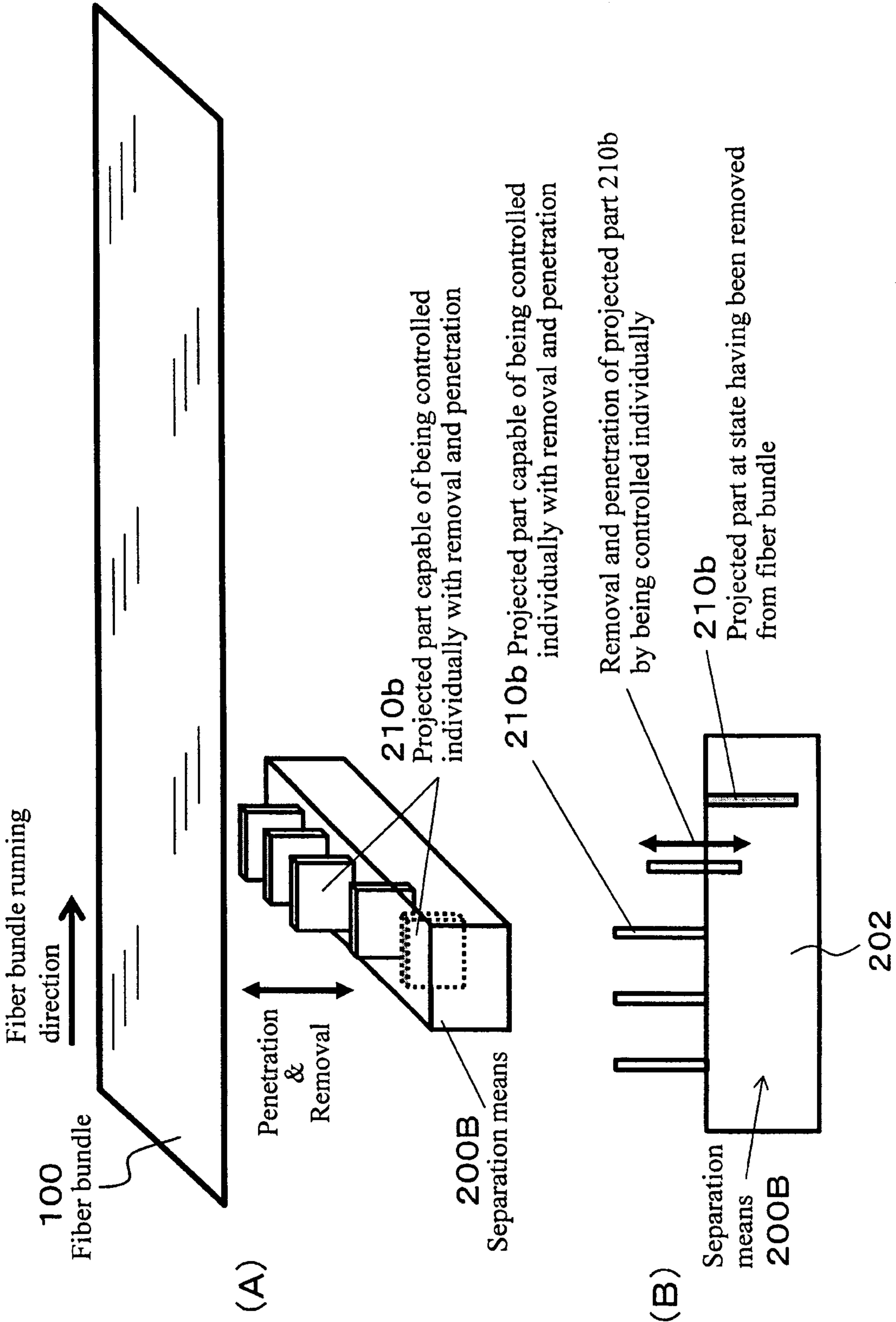


FIG. 8

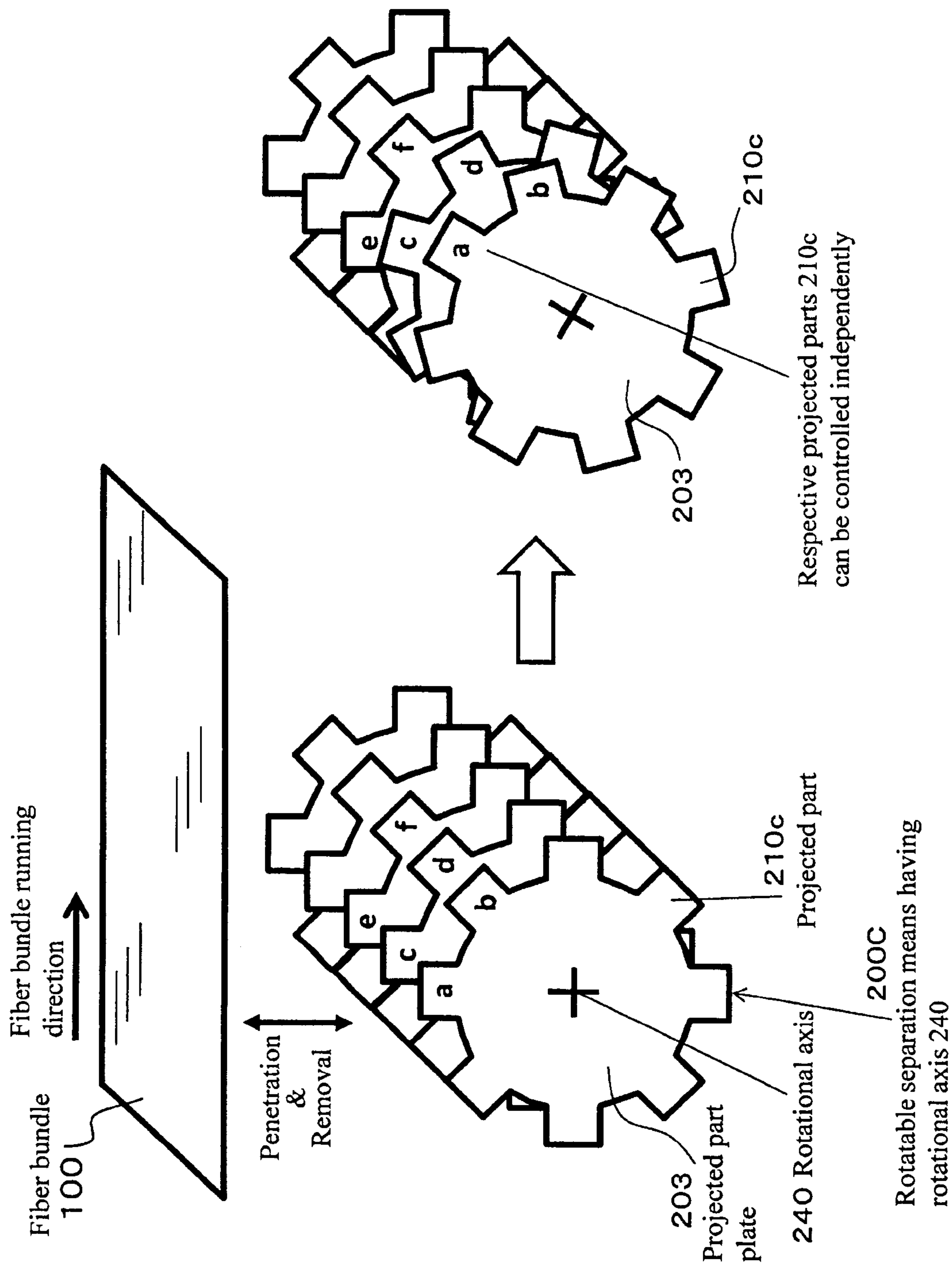


FIG. 9

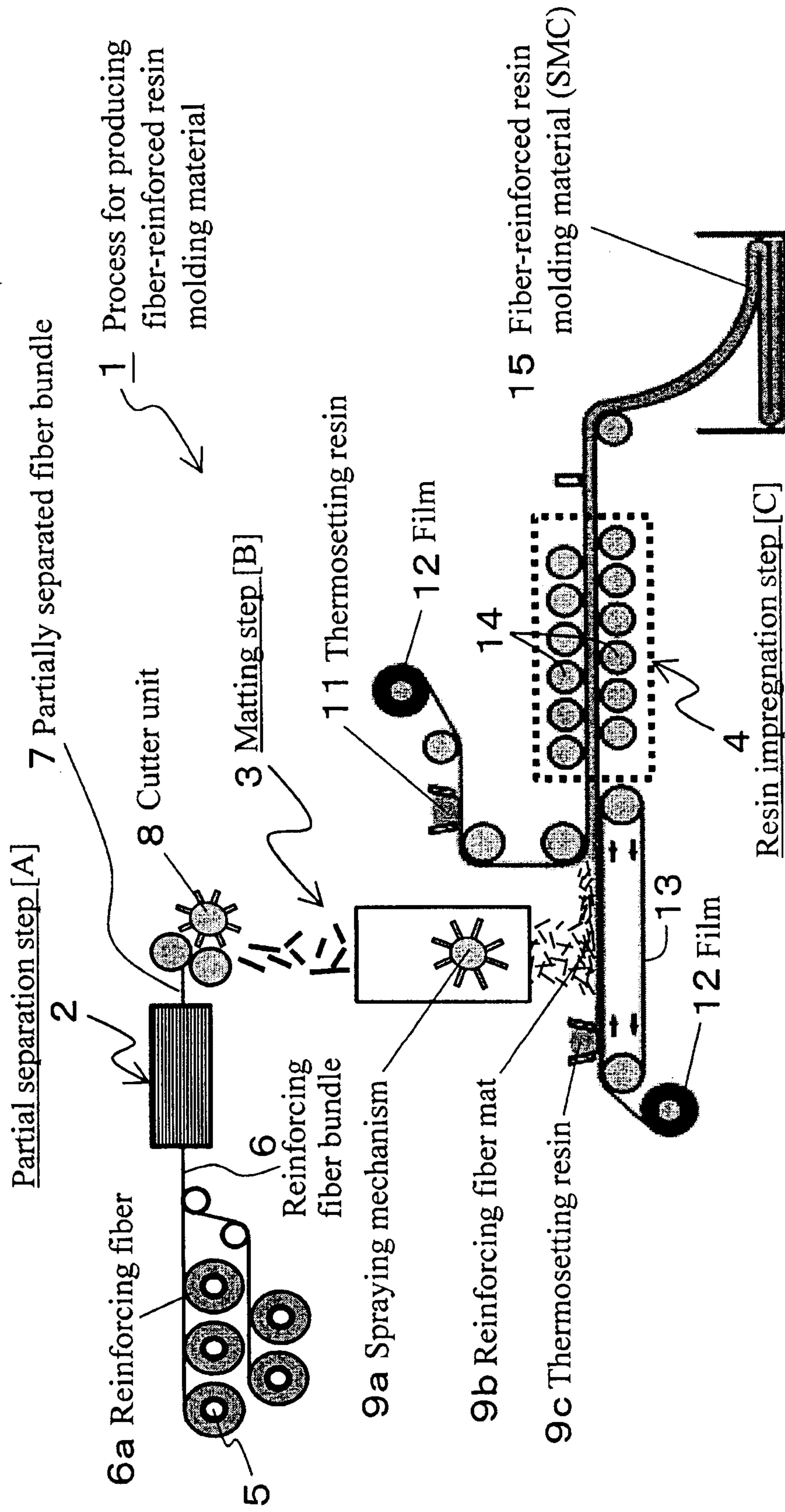


FIG. 10

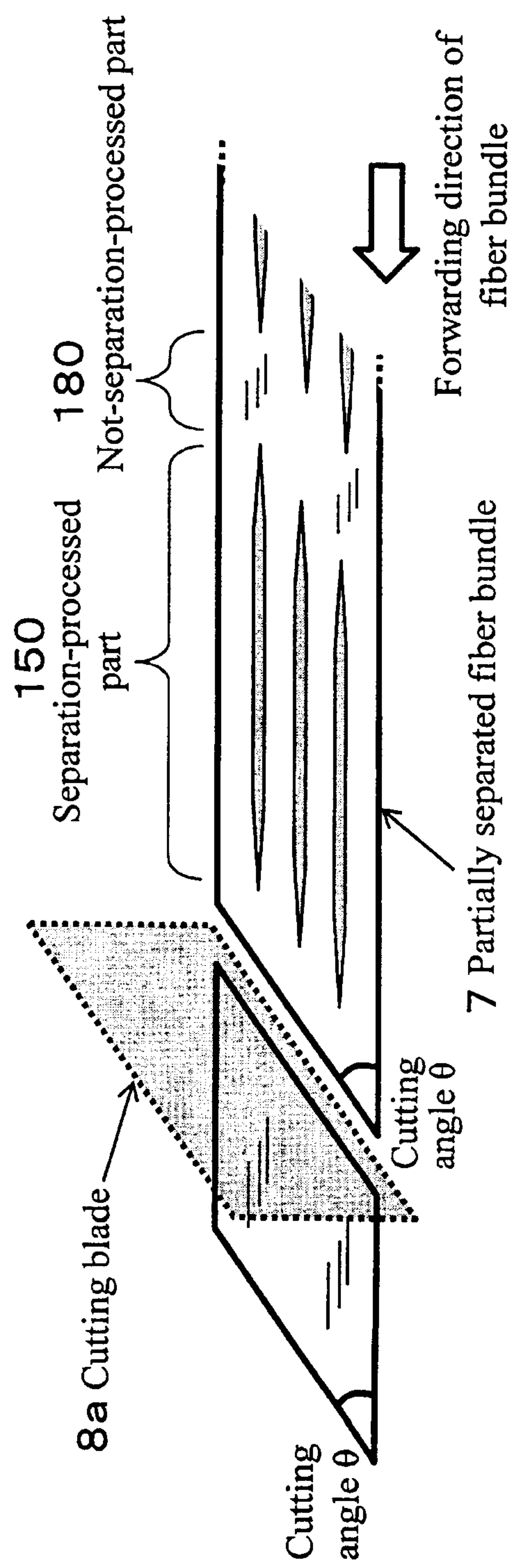


FIG. 1

