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(54) Title: METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR MAGNETIC SENSOR PRODUCING A CHANGING MAGNETIC FIELD

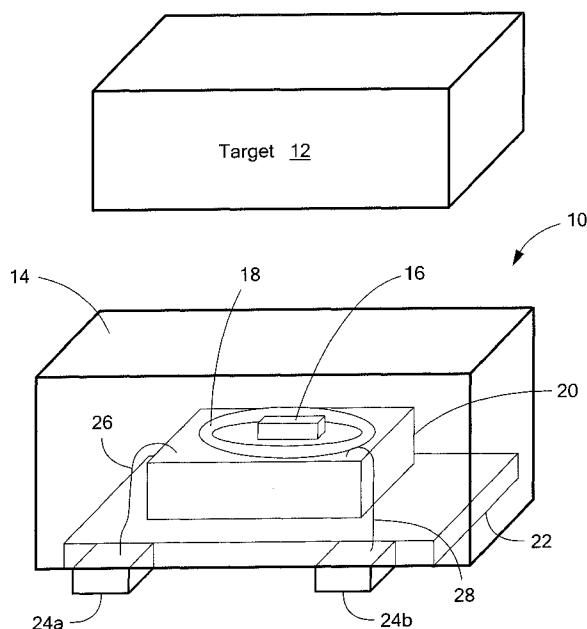


FIG. 1

(57) Abstract: Methods and apparatus for detecting a magnetic field include a semiconductor substrate (20), a coil (18) configured to provide a changing magnetic field in response to a changing current in the coil; and a magnetic field sensing element (16) supported by the substrate. The coil receives the changing current and, in response, generates a changing magnetic field. The magnetic field sensing element detects the presence of a magnetic target (12) by detecting changes to the magnetic field caused by the target and comparing them to an expected value.



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METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR MAGNETIC SENSOR PRODUCING A CHANGING MAGNETIC FIELD

FIELD

[0001] This disclosure relates to magnetic field sensors and, more particularly, to magnetic field sensors having an integrated coil or magnet.

BACKGROUND

[0002] There are a variety of types of magnetic field sensing elements, including, but not limited to, Hall Effect elements, magnetoresistance elements, and magnetotransistors. As is also known, there are different types of Hall Effect elements, for example, planar Hall elements, vertical Hall elements, and circular vertical Hall (CVH) elements. As is also known, there are different types of magnetoresistance elements, for example, anisotropic magnetoresistance (AMR) elements, giant magnetoresistance (GMR) elements, tunneling magnetoresistance (TMR) elements, Indium antimonide (InSb) elements, and magnetic tunnel junction (MTJ) elements.

[0003] Hall Effect elements generate an output voltage proportional to a magnetic field strength. In contrast, magnetoresistance elements change resistance in proportion to a magnetic field. In a circuit, an electrical current can be directed through the magnetoresistance element, thereby generating a voltage output signal proportional to the magnetic field.

[0004] Magnetic field sensors, which use magnetic field sensing elements, are used in a variety of devices including current sensors that sense a magnetic field generated by a current carried by a current-carrying conductor, magnetic switches (also referred to herein as a proximity detector) that sense the proximity of a ferromagnetic or magnetic object, rotation detectors that sense passing ferromagnetic articles, for example, gear teeth, and magnetic field sensors that sense magnetic field or magnetic flux densities of a magnetic field.

SUMMARY

[0005] Exemplary embodiments of the present invention provide methods and apparatus for magnetic sensor having an integrated coil and sensing element to detect

changes in a magnetic field generated by the excited coil due to the movement of a target, such as a ferromagnetic gear tooth. In one embodiment, the sensing element comprises a giant magnetoresistance (GMR) element, which has more sensitivity to magnetic field changes than a comparable Hall element. The GMR transducer may comprise a plurality of GMR elements in a bridge configuration, in which case a first pair of GMR elements of the H-bridge may be positioned at an end of the coil and a second pair of GMR elements may be positioned at an opposing end of the coil.

Alternatively, the magnetic field sensing element may be a Hall element.

[0006] In an embodiment, a magnetic field sensor includes a semiconductor substrate, a coil configured to provide a changing magnetic field in response to a changing current in the coil; and a magnetic field sensing element supported by the substrate and configured to sense the magnetic field as affected by the presence of a ferromagnetic target. The current may be provided by a pulsed or transient current source coupled to the coil. Features may include one or more of the following. The coil may be formed from at least one metal layer disposed on a surface of the substrate. At least a portion of the magnetic field sensing element may be positioned within a loop of the coil. A current source may be coupled to the coil. The coil may be positioned above or below the substrate. The coil may be a separately formed element included in the same package with the substrate.

[0007] In another embodiment, a method of detecting a magnetic field includes providing a semiconductor substrate, driving a changing current through a coil so that the coil generates an changing magnetic field, and sensing, with a magnetic field sensing element supported by the substrate, variations in the changing magnetic field due to a proximity of a ferromagnetic target. Features may include one or more of the following. The method may include forming the inductive coil from one or more metal layers disposed on a surface of the substrate and/or providing the magnetic field sensing element in the form of a plurality of GMR elements in a bridge configuration, in which case a first pair of GMR elements may be positioned at an end of the inductive coil and a second pair of GMR elements may be positioned at an opposing end of the coil. At least a portion of the magnetic field sensing element may be positioned within a loop of the inductive coil. The magnetic field sensing element may be provided in the form of a Hall element. The method may include supplying a pulsed or transient current to the coil, attaching the coil to a top or bottom surface of the

substrate, and/or providing the coil as a separately formed element within the same package as the substrate.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0008] The figures aid in explanation of the disclosed technology and illustrate various exemplary embodiments. They are not intended to limit the scope of the invention, nor are they intended to present every possible embodiment. Like numbers in the figures denote like elements.
- [0009] FIG. 1 is a diagram of an embodiment of a magnetic sensor having an integrated coil.
- [0010] FIG. 2 is a circuit diagram of a magnetic sensor system.
- [0011] FIG. 3 is a diagram of another embodiment of a magnetic sensor having an integrated coil.
- [0012] FIGS. 4A and 4B are top views of an exemplary coils.
- [0013] FIG. 5 is a diagram of an embodiment of a magnetic sensor having an integrated coil and a target.
- [0014] FIG. 6 is a diagram of an embodiment of a magnetic sensor having an integrated coil.
- [0015] FIG. 7 is a diagram of an embodiment of a magnetic sensor having an integrated coil.
- [0016] FIG. 8 is a diagram of a magnetic sensor assembly.
- [0017] FIG. 9 is a break-out diagram of a magnetic sensor assembly.
- [0018] FIG. 10A and FIG. 10B are diagrams of magnetic sensors and targets.
- [0019] FIG. 11 is a flowchart of a method for sensing a target.
- [0020] FIG. 12 is a flowchart of a method for sensing a target.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

- [0001] Before describing the present invention, some information is provided. As used herein, the term "magnetic field sensing element" is used to describe a variety of electronic elements that can sense a magnetic field. The magnetic field sensing element can be, but is not limited to, a Hall Effect element, a magnetoresistance element, or a magnetotransistor. As is known, there are different types of Hall Effect elements, for example, a planar Hall element, a vertical Hall element, and a Circular

Vertical Hall (CVH) element. As is also known, there are different types of magnetoresistance elements, for example, a semiconductor magnetoresistance element such as Indium Antimonide (InSb), a giant magnetoresistance (GMR) element, an anisotropic magnetoresistance element (AMR), a tunneling magnetoresistance (TMR) element, and a magnetic tunnel junction (MTJ). The magnetic field sensing element may be a single element or, alternatively, may include two or more magnetic field sensing elements arranged in various configurations, e.g., a half bridge or full (Wheatstone) bridge. Depending on the device type and other application requirements, the magnetic field sensing element may be a device made of a type IV semiconductor material such as Silicon (Si) or Germanium (Ge), or a type III-V semiconductor material like Gallium-Arsenide (GaAs) or an Indium compound, e.g., Indium-Antimonide (InSb).

[0002] As is known, some of the above-described magnetic field sensing elements tend to have an axis of maximum sensitivity parallel to a substrate that supports the magnetic field sensing element, and others of the above-described magnetic field sensing elements tend to have an axis of maximum sensitivity perpendicular to a substrate that supports the magnetic field sensing element. In particular, planar Hall elements tend to have axes of sensitivity perpendicular to a substrate, while metal based or metallic magnetoresistance elements (e.g., GMR, TMR, AMR) and vertical Hall elements tend to have axes of sensitivity parallel to a substrate.

[0003] As used herein, the term “magnetic field sensor” is used to describe a circuit that uses a magnetic field sensing element, generally in combination with other circuits. Magnetic field sensors are used in a variety of applications, including, but not limited to, an angle sensor that senses an angle of a direction of a magnetic field, a current sensor that senses a magnetic field generated by a current carried by a current-carrying conductor, a magnetic switch that senses the proximity of a ferromagnetic object, a rotation detector that senses passing ferromagnetic articles, for example, magnetic domains of a ring magnet or a ferromagnetic target (e.g., gear teeth) where the magnetic field sensor is used in combination with a back-biased or other magnet, and a magnetic field sensor that senses a magnetic field density of a magnetic field. As used herein, the term “target” is used to describe an object to be sensed or detected by a magnetic field sensor or magnetic field sensing element.

[0004] FIG. 1 is a diagram of an exemplary embodiment of a magnetic field sensor 10 and a target 12. Magnetic field sensor 10 may include a package 14, sensing element 16 (transducer), and coil 18. Also included are a semiconductor die or integrated circuit 20, lead frame 22, and leads 24a and 24b. Wire bonds 26 and 28 couple die 20 to leads 24a and 24b. In other embodiments the die 20 may be coupled to the leads 24a and 24b using other standard packaging methods, including but not limited to solder bumps, solder balls, or pillar bumps. In other embodiments the die may be attached, for example, in a flip-chip or chip-on-lead configuration.

[0005] In an embodiment, target 12 produces or provides a magnetic field. For example, in embodiments, target 12 comprises a hard ferromagnetic target that produces a magnetic field. Alternatively, target 12 can be any type of material that produces a magnetic field including, but not limited to, an electromagnet or other type of circuit. In embodiments, target 12 may also comprise a non-ferromagnetic material capable of having eddy currents induced therein. Target 12 may also comprise a soft ferromagnetic material that changes the magnitude and or direction of a magnetic field near or in proximity to the target.

[0006] Package 14 can be any type of chip or integrated circuit package known in the art, including, but not limited to a plastic package, ceramic package, a glass sealed ceramic package, a low-temperature co-fired ceramic, or a chip-on-board encapsulant. Semiconductor die 20 may comprise one or more integrated circuits that drive coil 18 and sensing element 16.

[0007] In some embodiments, coil 18 produces a magnetic field. Coil 18 would be a coil of conductive material that, when energized with a current flowing through the material, induces a magnetic field. Integrated circuit 20 may be configured to drive a changing current through coil 18 resulting in a changing magnetic field produced by coil 18. The changing current may be an alternating current, a ramped current, a pulsed current, transient current, or any type of changing current that causes coil 18 to produce a similarly changing, i.e. complementary, magnetic field. The changing magnetic field produced by coil 18 may have sufficient magnitude to intersect the body of, and/or induce eddy currents in, target 12.

[0008] As shown in FIG. 1, coil 18 is adjacent to integrated circuit 20. However, this is not a requirement. In various embodiments, coil 18 may be placed in any location that allows the magnetic field produced by coil 18 to generate eddy currents in

target 12 and to be detected by sensing element 16. Accordingly, coil 18 may be placed within package 14, on the surface of integrated circuit 20, outside of package 14, on the surface of package 14, on a separate substrate within package 14 that is independent of integrated circuit 20, etc.

[0009] Coil 18 may also be independent of package 14 and may, for example, be mounted separately from package 14. Coil 18 may be encapsulated in its own package. In embodiments, if coil 18 is separate from package 14, coil 18 may be electrically coupled to integrated circuit 20 via leads such as leads 24a and 24b. In other embodiments, coil 20 may be electrically coupled to a separate circuit that can drive current through coil 18 to produce the magnetic field. In other embodiments where a static, slowly changing, or near-constant magnetic field is desired, the coil 18 may be replaced with a hard ferromagnetic material (i.e., a permanent magnet). The hard ferromagnetic material may also be placed in any location that allows the ferromagnetic material to be detected by sensing element 16. Accordingly, the ferromagnetic material may be placed within package 14, on the surface of integrated circuit 20, outside of package 14, on the surface of package 14, on a separate substrate within package 14 that is independent of integrated circuit 20, etc. The ferromagnetic material may also be independent of package 14 and may, for example, be mounted separately from package 14.

[0010] Sensing element 16 may be a magnetic field sensing element, or any other type of circuit that can detect a magnetic field and produce an electrical signal in response to the detected magnetic field. The strength or magnitude of the signal may be proportional to the strength or magnitude of the detected magnetic field. In an embodiment, sensing element 16 is a Hall Effect element, a magnetoresistive element or circuit, a giant magnetoresistive (GMR) element or circuit, etc.

[0011] In operation, sensing element 16 will detect the magnetic field produced by coil 18 and be affected by the presence of target 12. In the absence of target 12, the detected magnetic field (and thus the resulting signal produced by sensing element 16) will have a known value. When this known value is detected, it may indicate the absence of target 12.

[0012] As target 12 moves relative to sensor 10, it affects the magnetic field generated by coil 18 and detected by sensing element 16. Recall that target 12 may produce its own magnetic field. Thus, as target 12 approaches sensor 10, the magnetic

field produced by target 12 combined with the magnetic field produced by coil 18. Thus, the presence of target 12 causes perturbations or alterations to the known value of the magnetic field produced by coil 18. These perturbations can be detected by sensing element 16. For example, magnetic flux detected by sensing element 16 is a vector sum of the magnetic field produced by target 12 and the magnetic field produced by coil 18. Accordingly, the signal produced by sensing element 16 represents a combination of the two magnetic fields, i.e. the magnitude of the combined magnetic fields. In embodiments, target 12 may be positioned to enhance the effect that it has on the magnetic field produced by coil 18. For example, to increase the additive effect of the magnetic fields, target 12 may be positioned so that its magnetic field vector is in-line with (i.e. in the same or opposite direction to, and/or aligned with) the magnetic field vector of coil 18 and/or so that target 12 is as close as possible to coil 18

[0013] Integrated circuit 20 may compare the magnitude of the detected magnetic field to the expected value of the magnetic field produced by coil 18. If the measured value differs from the expected value, it may indicate the presence or proximity of target 12. In embodiments, integrated circuit can also detect the relative distance of target 12. For example, the magnetic field of target 12 can be aligned so that, the more closely target 12 approaches sensor 10, the greater affect the magnetic field produced by target 12 has on the magnetic field produced by coil 18. Thus, as target 12 approaches sensor 10, it will create a greater difference between the measured magnetic field and the expected magnetic field. As this difference changes, sensor 10 can indicate a relative distance between target 12 and sensor 10. Based on the measured, combined magnetic field, sensor 10 may also detect presence or absence of the target.

[0014] In an embodiment, target 12 may move toward and/or away from sensor 10 during operation. By measuring the magnetic field at sensing element, sensor 10 can detect the presence and/or proximity of target 12. In an embodiment, target 12 may be a feature (such as a tooth) on a rotating wheel or gear. As the teeth pass by sensor 10, sensor 10 can create a signal (e.g. via pins 24a and/or 24b) indicating whether a tooth or valley (i.e. gap) in the gear is adjacent to sensor 10. If a tooth is present, sensor 10 can also indicate a relative distance between the tooth and sensor 10. For example, the signal produced by sensor 10 may change in amplitude based on the sensed proximity

of the tooth. Additionally, if no tooth is present, sensor 10 may indicate a relative distance (e.g. a relative depth) of the gap based on the amplitude of the signal. Of course, the signal produced by sensor 10 may be analog, digital, or switched. If the signal is switched, a high output may indicate the presence of target 12 (or a tooth thereon) and a low output may indicate the absence of target 12, or vice versa.

[0015] Turning to FIG. 2, an example of a circuit 30 for detecting speed, direction, and/or proximity of target 12 is shown. An adjustable, changing current source 32 controls current drivers 34 and 36, which drive coil 18 and produce a differential current through signal lines 38. The changing current source may be an AC source, a ramped current source, a switched current source, a pulsed current source, a transient current source, or any other current source that creates a current that changes in magnitude over time. The current through coil 18 produces a changing magnetic field which is detected by sensing element 16. (In FIG. 2, sensing element 16 is shown as a giant-magnetoresistive (GMR) bridge). Sensing element 16 produces a differential voltage signal on signal lines 40. A differential current amplifier 42 amplifies the differential current applied to the coil 18 for coupling to a peak detector 44. A differential voltage amplifier 46 receives the differential voltage signal from sensing element 16 for coupling to a peak detector 48. Comparator 50 compares the signals from peak detectors 44 and 48 and produces an output signal 52.

[0016] The current produced by coil drivers 34 and 36, as well as the outputs of amplifiers 46 and 42 can be adjusted. Thus, in the absence of target 12, the differential current on signal lines 38 will be a known value and the differential voltage produced by sensing element 16 on signal lines 40 will be a known value. As target 12 moves relative to sensing element 16, the magnetic field affected by target 12 may affect the differential voltage on signal lines 40. This change can be compared to the known value on signal lines 38. Thus, the presence and/or proximity of target 12 can change the output of amplifier 46, peak detector 48, and/or comparator 50.

[0017] FIG. 3 shows an alternative embodiment of the sensor 10 in FIG. 1. In FIG. 3, the coil 18 is placed so that the magnetic field vector produced by coil 18 is parallel to the top surface of integrated circuit 20. In this arrangement, sensing element 16 may comprise multiple components (e.g. multiple Hall Effect elements and/or multiple GMR elements), which may be positioned on either side of coil 18. This arrangement may optimize or improve the ability of sensor 10 to detect target 12 when target 12 is

located on either “side” of sensor 10. Because the magnetic field vector produced by coil 18 has a direction as shown by arrow 300 or arrow 302 (depending on the direction of current through coil 18), the magnetic field produced by target 12 may have a greater affect the magnetic field detected by sensing element 16 when target 12 is located on either side of sensor 10.

[0018] FIG. 4A is a top view of an on-chip coil 400 and sensing element 402. In embodiments, coil 400 may be the same as or similar to coil 18 and sensing element 402 may be the same as or similar to sensing element 16. Coil 400 may comprise a toroid-shaped coil as shown in FIG. 3. Alternatively, coil 400 may comprise fabricated substantially two dimensional elements. For example, coil 400 may be a conductive layer masked and fabricated on the surface of integrated circuit 20 to create an alternating pattern of straight and diagonal metal lines on two different levels or layers of integrated circuit 20. The pattern may be formed from a single conductive layer or multiple conductive layers on integrated circuit 20, depending upon the fabrication process and design that is used. As shown in FIG. 4A, the conductive layers would be formed of multiple layers of metal, for example. An example of a single conductive layer would be a meander type of pattern where the conductor zig-zags, but does not cross over itself.

[0019] When integrated circuit 20 drives current through the printed coil, it may produce a magnetic field as described above. Similar to the coil shown in FIG. 3, coil 400 may produce a magnetic field vector tangent (parallel) to the surface of the die or substrate. Sensing element 402 may comprise GMR elements 406, 408, 410, and 410. These GMR elements may be positioned on either side of coil 400 in line with the magnetic field vector produced by coil 400 to increase sensitivity to the magnetic field.

[0020] FIG. 4B shows an alternative top view layout for an exemplary magnetic field sensor having an on-chip coil 152 and a die 154 supporting a sensing element 156. The sensing element 156 is located proximate to coil 152. For simplicity, other circuitry of the magnetic field sensor are omitted.

[0021] In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 4B, the position of the sensing element 156 is aligned with one ‘side’ of coil 152. That is, sensing element 156 is aligned with a portion of coil 152 in which current is flowing in the same direction with respect to one side of the die. Other arrangements of coil relative to sensing element position are possible. For example, the sensing element can be generally

centered with respect to the coil. In such an embodiment, a sensing element comprising a planar Hall element may be preferred. Also, and again referring to the example embodiment shown in FIG. 4B, coil 152 is shown as being disposed above sensing element 156. It will be understood, however, that coil 152 could instead be disposed beneath the sensing element 156. In other embodiments coil 152 may have layers or conductors above and below sensing elements 156. With the latter arrangement, the coil can be fabricated with a standard IC process and then integrated with sensing element 156 in a separate process. The embodiment shown would be advantageous for a sensor sensitive in the plane of the die such as a vertical Hall element or a GMR, AMR, spin-valve, or TMR element.

[0022] Insulation layers may be placed between the coil and sensor material and/or die substrate as required by sensor and substrate material selection so as not to short circuit the materials and coil.

[0023] The particular size and geometry of the coil can vary to meet the needs of a particular application. The coil can be formed so that the turns have any practical shape, such as a square or rectangle (as illustrated in the top view of FIGS. 4A and 4B), or other shapes such as circle, oval, etc., or multiple layers.

[0024] In exemplary “on-chip” coil embodiments, the coil is formed using conventional deposition and or etching processes, or patterning and electroplating processes well known to one of ordinary skill in the art. In general, spacing from the coil to the sensing element can vary, in part as a result of voltage isolation requirements and magnetic coupling required, where magnetic coupling is the magnetic field produced by the coil per mA or other unit of current flowing in the coil. In general a higher magnetic coupling level uses less power for a given magnetic field level. It is also understood that insulation layers may be placed between the coils and the sensors and/or other die material to prevent shorting of the coil to other electrical layers in the device.

[0025] In FIG. 4B, the coil is shown as having a planar spiral geometry. The vias and connections are omitted in the figure (for clarity) but would be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art. It is understood that multiple metal layers can be used as well as other geometries of metal. Other coil geometries including but not limited to meander coils and solenoids may be used. For example, a cylindrical coil having coil turns of substantially uniform diameter (i.e., a solenoid type coil) may be used. The

coil arrangement can include a magnetic flux concentrator, which can be made of a soft magnetic material, to improve the magnetic flux generated by the coil. For example, a soft ferromagnetic core may be provided inside a solenoid type coil to concentrate the magnetic field generated by the coil.

[0026] In a cylindrical coil the direction of the magnetic field lines will be parallel to the length of the coil (that is, the longitudinal path of the coil). In a planar spiral coil design the direction of the field lines at the center of the coil will be substantially perpendicular to the plane of the coil but will be substantially parallel to the die surface under the turns of the coil. Consideration may be given to the direction of the field generated by the coil at various locations in choosing the appropriate position and type of the sensing element.

[0027] It will be appreciated that the size of an “on-chip” coil as depicted in FIG. 4A and 4B is likely to be much smaller than coils located elsewhere in a sensor, sensor assembly or application. Because magnetic fields generated by the relatively smaller “on-chip” coils may not be particularly strong, high sensitivity elements such as GMR may be more suitable for an on-chip coil design than less sensitive sensing types of elements such as Hall.

[0028] Additional details or alternative techniques for providing a conductive coil on a sensor die may be had with reference to U.S. Patent Application No. 13/468,478, filed May 10, 2012 and entitled “Methods and Apparatus for Magnetic Sensor Having Integrated Coil,” as well as U.S. Patent Publication No. 2010/00211347, U.S. Patent No. 8,030,918, and U.S. Patent No. 8,063,634, each of which is assigned to the Assignee of the subject application and incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[0029] Referring to FIG. 5, another embodiment of a magnetic field sensor 160 including a semiconductor die 162 having a first, active surface 162a in which a magnetic field sensing element or sensing element 164 is formed and a second, opposing surface 162b attached to a die attach area 166 on a first surface 168a of a lead frame 168, a first mold portion comprising a non-conductive mold material 170 enclosing the die and at least a portion of the lead frame, and a second mold portion 172 secured to the non-conductive mold material. The second mold portion 172, which can be a non-conductive material or a ferromagnetic material, is shown as but not required to be tapered from a first end 172a proximate to the lead frame 168 to a second end 172b distal from the lead frame.

[0030] Sensing element 164 in this and other embodiments may be the same as or similar to sensing element 16.

[0031] It will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that while the active surface 162a of the semiconductor die 162 is described herein as the surface “in” which the magnetic field sensing element is disposed or formed as is the case with certain types of magnetic field elements (e.g., Hall plate), the element may be disposed “over” or “on” the active semiconductor surface (e.g., magnetoresistance elements). For simplicity of explanation however, while the embodiments described herein may utilize any suitable type of magnetic field sensing elements, such elements will be described generally herein as being formed or disposed “in” the active semiconductor surface.

[0032] In use, the magnetic field sensor 160 like the other sensor embodiments described herein may be positioned in proximity to a ferromagnetic target, such as the illustrated gear 12', such that the magnetic field sensing element 164 is adjacent to the article 12' and is thereby exposed to a magnetic field altered by movement of the article. The magnetic field sensing element 164 generates a magnetic field signal proportional to the magnetic field.

[0033] The magnetic field sensor 160 generally includes additional circuitry formed in the active surface 162a of the die 162 for processing the magnetic field signal provided by the sensing element 164. The lead frame 168 includes leads 174a – 174c for coupling the circuitry to system components (not shown), such as a power source or microcontroller. Electrical connection between the leads 174a – 174c and the semiconductor die 162 can be provided with wire bonds 176a – 176c, respectively as shown. While the sensor 160 is shown to include three leads 174a – 174c, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that various numbers of leads are possible. Other techniques for electrically coupling the lead frame leads to the sensor components include solder bumps or balls, or pillar bumps. The sensor 160 may be provided in the form of a two to six pin Single In-Line (SIP) package, or some other number of pins as appropriate.

[0034] The first mold portion 170 is comprised of a non-conductive material so as to electrically isolate and mechanically protect the die 162 and the enclosed portion of the lead frame 168. Suitable materials for the non-conductive mold material 170

include thermoset and thermoplastic mold compounds and other commercially available IC mold compounds.

[0035] The non-conductive mold material of the first mold portion 170 is applied to the lead frame/die subassembly during a molding process to enclose the die 162 and a portion of the lead frame 168. The non-conductive first mold portion 170 has a first surface 170a and a second, opposing surface 170b. The shape and dimensions of the non-conductive first mold portion are selected to suit a particular IC package.

[0036] The second mold portion 172 may be the same non-conductive mold compound used to form the first mold portion 170. In some embodiments the second mold portion 172 is a different non-conductive mold compound or other moldable material than the material used for the first mold portion 170.

[0037] In some embodiments, the second mold portion 172 is comprised of a soft ferromagnetic material to form a concentrator. As will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art, various materials are suitable for providing the ferromagnetic mold material 172 in the form of a soft ferromagnetic material. In some embodiments, it may be desirable for the soft ferromagnetic mold material to have a relatively low coercivity and high permeability. Suitable soft ferromagnetic materials include, but are not limited to permalloy, NiCo alloys, NiFe alloys, steel, nickel, and soft magnetic ferrites.

[0038] The second mold portion 172 can be secured to the first mold portion 170 during a step or steps of a molding process, or using an adhesive, such as a thermoset adhesive (e.g., a two part epoxy).

[0039] In some embodiments, a portion of the first mold portion 170 that contacts the second mold portion 172 and/or the portion of its mold material that contacts the non-conductive mold material has a securing mechanism in order to improve the adhesion between the two materials and to prevent or reduce lateral slippage or shear between the materials. As one example, the lead frame 168 has extensions 168c (or "barbs") which extend beyond the non-conductive mold material and are enclosed by the mold material of the second mold portion 172, as shown. Such lead frame extensions additionally enhance the adhesion of the second mold portion/material to the lead frame itself. In such embodiments utilizing lead frame portions as a securing mechanism such that the mold material of the second mold portion 172 contacts such lead frame portions, it will be appreciated that the second mold portion 172 should be

non-conductive or have a sufficiently low conductivity to prevent the leads from electrically shorting resulting in the device not operating as intended. Alternative forms of securing mechanisms can be used.

[0040] Still referring to FIG. 5, the sensor 160 also includes a coil, indicated in this figure by reference numeral 178. In embodiments, coil 178 is a package level coil, i.e. a coil incorporated into package mold portion 172. Coil 178 may perform the same or similar function to coil 18. Coil 178 is positioned relative to sensing element 164 to provide a back bias magnetic field, which can be used to detect the target's profile as it passes the sensor. To this end, the coil 178 is positioned adjacent to the second surface 170b of the non-conductive mold material 170 so that the sensing element 164 is closer to the target 12' than the coil 178, as shown. It will be appreciated that it may be desirable in certain applications to rotate sensor 160 by 180° so that the coil 178 is closer to the target than the sensing element or to rotate the sensor by 90° so that the major face of the sensing element is orthogonal to the target, thereby achieving a different type of magnetically sensitive sensor, as may be desirable when the sensing element is a magnetoresistance element, for example, which has a different axis of sensing element sensitivity than a planar Hall element. It may also be desirable in an embodiment to rotate coil 178 such that its central axis is parallel to the surface of the die 162 for certain sensor configurations and sensing element combinations.

[0041] Various techniques and materials can be used to form the coil 178. For example, coil 178 can be formed from copper wire of various sizes and with various automated processes so as to provide an insulator between coil windings. The coil material selection, wire gauge selection, number of turns, and other design choices can be readily varied to suit a particular application so as to produce a magnetic field of a desired strength. The coil 178 may be formed so that each turn is in the general shape of, or approximately the shape of, a circle, rectangle, or other general shapes such as an oval, as desirable to suit a particular application and packaging arrangement.

[0042] Coil 178 may be secured to the second surface 170b of the non-conductive mold material 170 by various means. As one example, an adhesive, such as an epoxy, may be used to secure the coil in place. Once secured in place, the mold material 172 may be formed by a suitable molding process, such as by injection molding for example.

[0043] A mold cavity used to define the second mold portion 172 may include a mandrel so that the second mold portion forms a ring-shaped structure having a central aperture 180, here extending from the second surface 170b of the non-conductive mold material to a second end 172b of the second mold portion. The mold material 172 may form a conventional O-shaped ring structure or a D-shaped structure. Alternatively, the mold material 172 may form only a partial ring-like structure, as may be described as a “C” or “U” shaped structure. More generally, the mold material 172 comprises a non-contiguous central region such that the central region is not formed integrally with its outer region. Such central region may be an open area, such as in the case of aperture 180 in FIG. 8, or may contain a mold material, for example, a ferromagnetic mold material. A third mold material may be formed by an additional molding step or other suitable fabrication technique, including but not limited to “potting” or another molding step, so as to secure that third mold material to the second mold portion 172. The third mold material may be comprised of a hard ferromagnetic material, a soft ferromagnetic material, or a non-ferromagnetic mold compound.

[0044] The second mold portion 172 is tapered from its first end 172a (or a location close to its first end) to its second end 172b as is apparent from the side view of FIG. 5. In particular, the second mold portion has a first taper to its outer circumferential surface 182a and a second taper to its inner central aperture surface 182b. The purpose of the taper is to facilitate removal of the sensor 160 from the mold cavity. The angle of the taper of the surfaces 182a, 182b may be the same or similar to each other and generally, the angle of the taper of the surfaces 182a, 182b is less than approximately 15 to 20 degrees. In some embodiments, the angle of taper is on the order of 2-7 degrees. In some embodiments the taper 182b may have more than a single slope.

[0045] The sensor can also be arranged in a lead on chip configuration with the lead frame positioned above the die. An adhesive may be used to secure the lead frame to the active surface of the die.

[0046] Referring to FIG. 6, an alternative magnetic field sensor 190 includes a semiconductor die 192 having a first active surface 192a in which a magnetic field sensing element 194 is disposed and a second, opposing surface 192b attached to a die attach area 196 on a first surface 198a of a lead frame 198, a first mold portion or non-conductive mold material 200 enclosing the die and at least a portion of the lead frame,

and a second mold portion or mold material 202 secured to a portion of the non-conductive mold material. A securing mechanism, or other suitable mechanisms, may be provided to enhance the adhesion between the first and second mold materials. In embodiments, sensor 190 may be the same as or similar to sensor 10.

[0047] The non-conductive mold material 200 has a protrusion 204 extending away from a second surface 198b of the lead frame 198 as shown. Protrusion 204 prevents there being a void in the bottom surface of sensor 190 (adjacent to the second end 202b of the mold material), since the presence of a void may make overmolding more difficult. It will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that the protrusion may extend all or only part of the way to the second end 202b of the second mold material 202. In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 6, protrusion 204 terminates before the second end 202b of the second mold material 202. Thus, distal end 204a of the protrusion 204 is covered with the second mold material 202, as shown. It will also be appreciated that the protrusion 204, which is shown extending beyond (e.g. below) coil 206, may extend to a position that is not below coil 206. If protrusion 204 extends to a position that is not below coil 206, the second mold material 202 would generally enclose the protrusion 204 and the coil 206.

[0048] Sensor 190 includes a coil 206 that may be the same as or similar to the coil 18 of FIG. 1. Here, coil 206 is positioned concentrically with respect to the protrusion 204 of the non-conductive mold material 200, although it will be appreciated that concentric positioning is not required. It will be appreciated that the taper to protrusion 204 may be eliminated or altered as suitable for a particular application. In some applications the protrusion may be useful as an aligning feature for coil 206 during assembly or manufacturing. Here again, coil 206 may be secured to the mold material 200 by an adhesive. Alternatively however, coil 206 may be sized and shaped to provide an interference fit with respect to the protrusion 204 such that adhesive is not necessary and coil 206 may be sufficiently held in place relative to the mold material 200 by the interference fit when the subassembly, including the mold material 200, lead frame 198 and die 192, are placed into the mold cavity for formation of the mold material 202.

[0049] While sensor 190 is shown to have a protrusion 204 extending only partially through mold material 202 to terminate before the second end 202b of the second mold material 202, it will be appreciated that a similar sensor including a coil

that may be (although is not required to be) concentrically disposed with respect to a protrusion of the non-conductive mold material can be provided with a protrusion of the type which extends to the second end 202b of second mold material 202 or the protrusion 204 may extend beyond the second end 202b of the second mold material 202.

[0050] The second mold material 202 is tapered from a first end 202a proximate to the lead frame 198 to a second end 202b distal from the lead frame. The second mold material 202 is tapered along both its outer circumferential surface 208a and its inner surface 208b from its first end 202a to its second end 202b. Here again, the angle of taper of the surface 208a may be on the order of less than 15-20 degrees. The angle of the taper of the inner surface 208b may be the same as or similar to the angle of the taper of the outer surface 208a.

[0051] The second mold material 202 has a non-contiguous central region, here in the form of a central aperture defined by the inner surface 208b. This non-contiguous central region of mold material 202 may take various shapes, so as to form an O-shaped, D-shaped, C-shaped, or U-shaped structure as examples.

[0052] The second mold material can be provided in the form of a non-conductive material or ferromagnetic material such as a soft ferromagnetic material or hard ferromagnetic material. For example, in embodiments in which the material is a soft ferromagnetic material, the magnetic field generated by the coil can be focused or otherwise concentrated as desired by the soft ferromagnetic mold material. Alternatively, in embodiments in which the material is a hard ferromagnetic material, the magnetic field provided by the coil can be used to modulate the magnetic field provided by the hard ferromagnetic material, in order to thereby reduce the peak current otherwise required to provide the same magnetic field strength with just the coil (i.e., if the hard ferromagnetic mold material were not present). Since the back bias functionality is provided by the coil, the second mold portion/material may be eliminated entirely (as is shown in FIG. 10) in which case the non-conductive mold material with the coil attached to its surface can be packaged to provide the resulting sensor IC. Such an arrangement can be provided in a package of the type described in a U.S. Patent No. 6,265,865 or a U.S. Patent No. 5,581,179, each of which is assigned to the Assignee of the subject application and incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

- [0053] In applications including the second mold portion/material, such mold material may be tapered from a first end proximate to the lead frame to a second end distal from the lead frame (or for some portion thereof) and the sensor may, optionally, include a third mold material in the form of an overmold in order to protect and electrically insulate the device.
- [0054] Sensor 190 may, optionally, include a third mold material 210 in the form of an overmold in order to protect and electrically insulate the device. The third mold material 210 may be applied during a third molding step/process or alternatively by any suitable fabrication method. Overmold 210 is considered optional because its purpose is to provide electrical insulation. In embodiments in which ferromagnetic mold material 202 provides sufficient insulation (e.g., provides more than approximately 1 mega-Ohm of resistance in certain applications), overmold 210 may be eliminated. It will be appreciated that overmold 210 may be provided for the sensor of FIG. 1, 3, 4, 5 and other embodiments. Suitable materials for providing overmold material 210 include, but are not limited to standard die encapsulation mold compounds such as PPS, nylon, SUMIKON® EME of Sumitomo Bakelite Co., Ltd., or Hysol® mold compounds of Henkel AG & Co. KGaA.
- [0055] Referring to FIG. 7, an alternative magnetic field sensor 220 includes a semiconductor die 222 having a first active surface 222a in which a magnetic field sensing element 224 is disposed and a second, opposing surface 222b attached to a die attach area 226 on a first surface 228a of a lead frame 228 and a non-conductive mold material 230 enclosing the die and at least a portion of the lead frame. In an embodiment, sensor 220 may be the same as or similar to sensor 10.
- [0056] Sensor 220 includes a coil 232 secured to, and more particularly, enclosed by, the non-conductive mold material 230. The wire of coil 232 may be wound around a mandrel or bobbin 234, as shown. In one illustrative embodiment, mandrel 234 may be comprised of a soft ferromagnetic material or a plastic and remain part of the final device. In other embodiments, mandrel 234 is used during coil winding but then not made a part of the final package. Mandrel 234 and coil 232 may be secured to the surface 228b of lead frame 228 that is opposite the die 222 with an adhesive or other securing mechanism such that coil 232 is secured to the lead frame 228 when the subassembly is placed in a mold cavity and the non-conductive mold material 230 is formed.

[0057] Additional details or alternative techniques for providing a package with one or multiple mold materials may be had with reference to U.S. Patent Application No. 13/748,999, filed January 24, 2013 and entitled “Magnetic Field Sensor Integrated Circuit with Integral Ferromagnetic Material,” which is assigned to the Assignee of the subject application and incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. Other examples of securing mechanisms include the use of an adhesive material and/or various other features designed to provide interference and/or an interlocking mechanism between the mold materials.

[0058] The signal may be provided to the coil through extra pins, allowing an external connection to the coil. The signal may be an AC signal, a ramped signal, a pulsed signal, or any other type of changing (e.g. non-DC) signal that, when applied to the coil, can produce a changing magnetic field. Alternatively, the signal could be provided through connections to the die. For example, a wire coupled to a coil terminal could be soldered to the die or connected to the die via wire bonds. In an alternative embodiment, a portion of the lead frame could be used to connect to the coil wire and to the die (e.g., via a wire bond). These connection areas of the lead frame could be unconnected to the remainder of the lead frame after molding and trimming. Any other suitable connecting means could be used.

[0059] FIGS. 8-9 illustrate yet another type of packaging for a magnetic field sensor with a coil. Referring to FIGS. 8 and 9, a magnetic field sensor assembly 240 includes a packaged magnetic field sensor IC 242, a coil unit 244, and a housing having a case (or housing shell) 246 and an end cap 248. Case 246 has a first end 250a with an opening (not shown) and a second end 250b that includes a window 252. When each of these elements is serially placed through the opening 250a of case 246 (in the order of sensor IC 242, then coil unit 244 followed by the end cap 248, as shown in the exploded view of FIG. 9), the “fully assembled” magnetic field sensor assembly 240 takes on the form shown in the configuration shown in FIG. 8. Although the housing is shown as a two-piece housing having a generally cylindrical shape, other types of housings could be used as well.

[0060] The packaged magnetic field sensor IC 242 is shown to include a first package portion 254 corresponding to a magnetic field sensor chip within a protective package body and a second package portion, in the form of conductive leads 256. There may be three conductive leads 256, with a lead to correspond to the power and

ground connections and a lead for the output signal (as shown in the embodiments of FIGS. 3 and 6, for a “three-wire” device), or some other number of leads. Coil unit 244 may include a coil body portion 257 containing a coil (which can be, e.g., a spiral coil, a solenoid type coil, solenoid type coil with a soft ferromagnetic core, or other type of coil configuration) and conductive leads 258a and 258b. Materials for the entire coil body portion 257 (exclusive of the internal coil) may include plastic (or other mold compound) or non-ferromagnetic material.

[0061] Alternatively, for a coil unit design that integrates a magnetic flux concentrator or guide, the top of coil body portion 257 (i.e., the part between the coil and the sensing element of the sensor 242 IC) could be made of plastic (or other mold compound) or non-ferromagnetic material, and the sides and bottom of coil body portion 257 could be made of a soft ferromagnetic material to help reduce the reluctance path, i.e., guide the magnetic flux more efficiently.

[0062] One of the leads, e.g., lead 258a, is a signal input for connecting to the signal source (e.g., coil input line 26, shown in FIG. 1). As described above, the signal source may be a changing signal (i.e. a non-DC signal) that can produce a changing magnetic field when applied to the coil. The other lead, e.g., lead 258b, is a ground terminal for connecting to a reference potential (e.g. ground). The coil of coil unit 244 may be driven in electrical isolation from the sensor IC 242 with no common node. If, however, the sensor IC ground and the coil unit ground are to be tied together, then the assembly 240 could be designed to have one less pin/lead for external connections. In the assembly 240, the leads 256 of the packaged sensor IC and leads 258 of the coil unit 244 extend outwardly from the opening in the first end 250a of the case 246. The first package portion 254 is positioned in the case 246 part way through the window 252 so that a first body face 260 extends outwardly from second end 250b of the case 246. When the sensor assembly 240 is mounted in an application, the first body face 260 will be positioned in proximity to the target’s profile.

[0063] The illustrative housing of FIGS. 8-9 can be constructed according to techniques like those described in the above-referenced U.S. Patent No. 5,581,179, or other suitable techniques. The case 246 can be formed of a polymeric insulating material, as described in the aforementioned patent, or, alternatively, a soft ferromagnetic material. In other embodiments, a separate magnetic flux concentrator may be included in the assembly.

[0064] FIG. 10A and FIG. 10B illustrate examples of a magnetic sensor system 1000 for detecting a non-ferromagnetic target 1001. As shown in FIG. 10A, sensor system 1000 includes a magnetic field sensor 1003 having one or more magnetic field sensing elements 1002 and 1004. Sensor 1003 may include a sensor integrated circuit or die 1015 and one or more magnetic sources (e.g. coils or magnets, such as a back-bias magnet) 1005 capable of producing magnetic field 1006. Although shown as having two magnetic field sensing elements 1002 and 1004, sensor 1003 may contain fewer or more than two sensing elements. Although shown as having a single magnetic source, sensor 1003 may include multiple magnetic sources. One skilled in the art will recognize that, if sensor 1003 has more than one magnetic source, the magnetic fields produced by those sources may be viewed as a single, combined magnetic field 1006 produced by multiple discrete sources. It is also noted that the orientation of the magnetic source to the sensing element or sensing elements shown in Figs. 10A and B is schematic in nature and may be modified in various embodiments. For example, sensor 1003 (and/or die 1015) may be positioned between a magnetic source 1005 and a target 1001. In other embodiments the magnetic source or sources and sensing element or elements have different positions relative to the target.

[0065] Sensing elements 1002 and 1004 may be the same as or similar to any or all of the sensors described above with respect to the preceding figures 1-9. In other embodiments sensing elements 1002 and 1004 could be separate magnetic field sensors joined by some common circuitry or with the output of one sensor used as an electrical input to another sensor if the two sensors with their sensing elements were in separate packages. As described above, sensing elements 1002 and 1004 may include a magnetic source 1005 (e.g. a coil and/or magnet) to produce a magnetic field 1006. Alternatively, magnetic source 1005 may be mounted separately from die 1015. In such an embodiment, source 1005 may be positioned relative to target 1001 so that a magnetic field 1006 intersects the body of target 1001. Although magnetic source 1005 is shown in FIG. 10A and 10B as part of die 1015, this is not a requirement. In various embodiments, magnetic source 1005 may be separate from die 1015, part of die 1015, mounted or placed adjacent to or on die 1015, etc. For example, in various embodiments, magnetic source 1005 may be arranged in any configuration or arrangement that allows magnetic source 1005 to produce a magnetic field 1006 that

can be detected by sensing elements 1002 and/or 1004. Examples of such configurations and arrangements are described above in relation to Figs. 1-9.

[0066] As described above, magnetic field 1006 or may be a static magnetic field produced by a permanent magnet (e.g. a hard ferromagnetic material) or an electromagnet with a DC or other slowly changing current to produce a magnetic field.

[0067] Although shown having two sensing elements 1002 and 1004, system 1000 may include only a single sensing element, or may include more than two sensing elements. As will be described below, one or more sensing element(s) can be used to detect proximity, presence, speed, direction, and other properties of target 1001.

[0068] In an embodiment, target 1001 is a non-ferromagnetic target. Target 1001 may comprise a conductive material such as copper, aluminum, titanium, etc., and may have a size and thickness that allow eddy currents to form within, on, or near the surface of target 1001.

[0069] In operation, magnetic source 1005 produces magnetic field 1006 and sensing elements 1002 and 1004 react to or sense magnetic field 1006. In an embodiment, sensing elements 1002 and 1004 generate signals 1002a and 1004a, respectively. Amplifiers 1030 and 1032 receive these signals, amplify them, and supply them to processor 1034. Processor 1034 then processes the signals to determine presence, speed, direction, position, or other properties of target 1001. In other embodiments other variations of circuitry could be used to sense the target.

[0070] Through operation of Faraday's law of induction, since the body of target 1001 is conductive (and/or paramagnetic), magnetic field 1006 induces an eddy current (e.g. eddy current 1010 and/or eddy current 1012) on or near the surface of target 1001. In the case where magnetic fields 1006 is a changing magnetic field, changes in the magnetic field will induce the eddy currents in target 1001. In the case where magnetic field 1006 is a static magnetic field, motion of the conductive target through the magnetic field, cause eddy currents 1010 and 1012 to form within target 1001 or 1001'. Irregular features or shapes of the target can influence the presence or magnitude of the induced eddy currents.

[0071] Multiple eddy currents 1010 and 1012 are shown for ease of illustration. One skilled in the art will recognize that magnetic field 1006 may induce a single eddy current or multiple eddy currents in target 1001, which may be added or combined together to form a combined eddy current within target 1001. In certain embodiments,

magnetic source 1005 may be configured to produce a shaped magnetic field 1006. In other words, magnetic source 1005 may produce multiple magnetic fields that add together in various patterns so that the resulting, combined magnetic field has local areas that are relatively strong and local areas that are relatively weak. In such embodiments, magnetic source 1005 may comprise multiple coils, magnets, or other magnetic sources. By shaping the magnetic field 1006, magnetic source 1005 can control the location, direction, and strength of the eddy currents 1010 and 1012 induced in target 1001.

[0072] The eddy currents 1010 and 1012 formed within target 1001 create their own, secondary magnetic fields, which oppose changes in magnetic field 1006 in the target 1001. These magnetic field changes can be due, for example, to magnetic source 1005 changing the strength or shape of magnetic field 1006 over time. In other embodiments, if magnetic field 1006 is a static (e.g. non-changing, or slowly-changing) magnetic field, the motion (e.g. rotation) of target 1001 through magnetic field 1006 may cause target 1001 to produce eddy currents which result in changes to the magnetic field 1006. The magnetic fields caused by eddy currents 1010 and 1012 will tend to oppose the changes in magnetic field 1006, and may increase or reduce the amount of magnetic flux flowing through the magnetic sensing elements 1002 and 1004. Thus, eddy currents 1010 and 1012 will tend to increase or reduce the amplitude of the signals produced by the magnetic field sensing elements 1002 and 1004. In contrast, if target 1001 were not present, no eddy currents or opposing magnetic field would be induced, and thus the amplitude of the signals produced by the magnetic field sensing elements would not be increased or reduced. Accordingly, system 1000 can detect the presence of target 1001 by detecting a change in amplitude of the signals produced by sensing elements 1002 and 1004, and due to the presence of eddy currents in the target.

[0073] In the case where magnetic field 1006 is a static magnetic field, motion of the target through the magnetic field causes changes to eddy currents 1010 and 1012. As shown in FIG. 10A, a point 1020 on the surface of target 1001 may have negligible magnetic field when it is relatively distant from magnetic source 1005. As point 1020 approaches a point 1022 on sensor 1003, it will be exposed to an increasing magnitude of magnetic field 1006, and thereby create eddy current 1010 to oppose that change. Similarly, as point 1020 passes point 1024 on sensor 1003, it will see a decrease in the

magnetic field from magnetic source 1005, thus creating an eddy current 1012 to oppose this change.

[0074] Given the direction of target rotation shown by arrow 1026, eddy current 1010 will reduce the field sensed by magnetic field sensing element 1004, and eddy current 1012 will increase the field sensed by magnetic field sensing element 1002. If the direction of rotation is opposite, eddy currents 1012 and 1010 will be of opposite magnitude, i.e. eddy current 1010 will increase the field sensed by magnetic field sensing element 1004 and eddy current 1012 will decrease the field sensed by magnetic field sensing element 1002. Thus, the amplitude of the signal produced by magnetic field sensing elements 1002 and 1004 may depend the direction of target rotation. Accordingly, system 1000 can detect the direction of target 1001 rotation by detecting a change in the signals produced by sensing elements 1002 and 1004, spatially located in system 1000.

[0075] Magnetic field sensing elements 1002 and 1004 may be spatially arranged so that there is a physical distance between them. Spacing the sensing elements apart in this way can allow each sensing element 1002 and 1004 to detect magnetic fields produced by eddy current in a different, localized area of target 1001. For example, as shown, sensing element 1002 is closer to eddy current 1012 and sensing element 1004 is closer to eddy current 1010. Thus, the magnetic field sensed by sensing element 1002 will be more greatly affected by eddy current 1012 and the magnetic field sensed by sensing element 1004 will be more greatly affected by eddy current 1010.

[0076] Target 1001 may also have irregular features, such as feature 1014. Feature 1014 may be a valley, gap, recess, a non-conductive region, a less conductive region, or any type of region that changes the eddy currents 1010 and 1012 induced by magnetic fields 1006 and 1008. In another embodiment, the feature 1014 could be a tooth, bump, or protrusion of the target. In another embodiments combinations of gaps and protrusions would be possible, for example, but not limited to approximately three different radial distances from the center of rotation, i.e. a valley, a nominal radius, and a tooth. Thus, when feature 1014 is adjacent to magnetic field 1006 or 1008, the eddy current induced in target 1001 may be different from the eddy current induced when feature 1014 is not adjacent to magnetic field 1006 or 1008. For example, if feature 1014 is a gap or a non-conductive region, there may be no eddy current induced within region 1014 and no opposing magnetic field. Alternatively, an eddy current may be

induced in feature 1014, but the eddy current may have a different strength or magnitude than eddy current 1012 or 1010 that are induced in the main body of target 1001.

[0077] The sensor 1003 and sensing elements 1002 or 1004 may detect a change in the magnetic field due to the presence of feature 1014 and produce a signal indicating that feature 1014 has been detected. If the target is rotating at a particular speed, peaks or valleys may appear on signals 1002a and 1004a as feature 1014 passes by sensing element 1002 and 1004. Processor 1034 can detect and process these peaks and valleys to determine speed, presence, position, direction of rotation, etc.

[0078] In another embodiment, the main body of target 1001 may be non-conductive, while feature 1014 may be conductive. In this case, eddy currents may be induced within feature 1014 but not within the main body of target 1001. Thus, the opposing magnetic field may only be present when feature 1014 is adjacent to sensor 1002 or 1004.

[0079] FIG. 10B illustrates another embodiment of system 1000 that has an irregularly shaped target 1001'. Due to the irregular shape (shown as an oval in FIG. 10B), as target 1001' rotates past sensors 1002 and 1004, some portions of the body of target 1001' may be closer to sensors 1002 and 1004, while other portions may be further away. For example, as shown, region 1016 of target 1001' is closer to sensor 1004 than region 1018 is to sensor 1002.

[0080] Because region 1016 is closer than region 1018 to magnetic field 1006, eddy current 1010 may be stronger than eddy current 1012, because the eddy currents are induced by magnetic field 1006. Accordingly, the magnetic field produced by eddy current 1010 may be stronger than the magnetic field produced by eddy current 1012. Additionally, because the magnetic field produced by eddy current 1010 is closer to sensor 1004 than the magnetic field produced by eddy current 1012 is to sensor 1002, the eddy current 1010 may have a greater effect on the magnetic flux flowing through the magnetic sensing element within sensor 1004. Thus, the magnetic field induced in region 1016 may provide a different response in the sensor than the magnetic field induced in region 1018. In other words, sensors 1002 and 1004 may detect whether the region of target 1001' adjacent to the sensor is relatively close or relatively far away from the sensor based on the extent to which the eddy current affects the magnetic field detected by the sensor. System 1000 may thus determine the position, speed,

and/or direction of target 1001' based on which regions of irregularly shaped target 1001' are adjacent to the sensors as target 1001' moves.

[0081] Although shown as an elliptical target, target 1001' can have any irregular shape so long as some regions of target 1001' can be closer to the sensors while other regions can be further away. For example, target 1001' can be a toothed wheel, a toothed rack in a rack and pinion system, a square or rectangle having corners, or any other shape having protrusions or other features that can move relative to sensors 1002 and 1004.

[0082] In the case where magnetic fields 1006 and 1008 are static (i.e. DC) fields, the irregular features or shapes of targets 1001 and 1001', and/or the motion of the targets, may induce the eddy current within the target. Recall that eddy currents are caused by a changing magnetic field through a conductor. Therefore, if the target is stationary and the magnetic fields are static, no eddy currents will form because the magnetic field intersecting the target will not be changing. However, eddy currents will be created within the body of the target as it moves or rotates through a static magnetic field. If target 1001 or 1001' contains no irregular features or shapes, eddy currents having a constant strength will be induced in the body of target 1001 as it rotates. As long as the target is moving, these eddy currents can be used to detect the presence of target 1001. As the speed of target 1001 changes, the magnitude of the eddy currents, and the strength of the magnetic fields produced by the eddy currents, will also change. Thus, the sensors can also detect the speed of the target by measuring the strength of the magnetic field produced by the eddy currents.

[0083] As the features and irregular shapes of target 1001 and target 1001' move through the magnetic field, the eddy currents (and thus the magnetic fields produced by the eddy currents) will change. For example, as target 1001 rotates and feature 1014 moves through the magnetic fields, the irregular shape or conductivity of feature 1014 passing through the magnetic field causes changes to the eddy currents within target 1001. Similarly, as the irregular shape of target 1001' rotates through the magnetic fields, regions of target 1001' move relatively closer or relatively further away from the sensors. This also causes the eddy currents induced in target 1001' to change. These changes can be detected by the sensors 1002 and 1004 as presence of the target, motion of the target, speed of the target, etc.

[0084] In certain configurations, system 1000 may be able to detect direction of motion of target 1001. In one embodiment, the system is comprised of two sensors 1002, 1004, oriented as to detect different locations on the target. For example, if target 1001 is spinning in a clockwise direction, feature 1014 will pass by sensor 1002 first, and pass by sensor 1004 second. Accordingly, the signal produced by sensor 1002 to indicate the presence of feature 1014 will precede the signal produced by sensor 1004. Conversely, if target 1001 is turning in a counter-clockwise direction, the signal produced by sensor 1004 to indicate the presence of feature 1014 will precede the signal produced by sensor 1002. By monitoring the phase relationship signals produced by sensor 1002 and sensor 1004, system 1000 can determine the speed and direction of target 1001.

[0085] Although shown as a rotating target, target 1001 can also be a linear target, such as a rack in a rack and pinion system, or any other type of target that can move relative to sensors 1002 and 1004.

[0086] FIG. 11 is a flowchart of a process 1100 for sensing a magnetic field. In block 1102, a circuit (e.g. integrated circuit 20 in FIG. 1) may drive a changing current through a coil (e.g. coil 18). In an embodiment, the changing current may be a periodic current such as an AC current, a saw tooth pattern current, a pulsed current, a DC, or a near DC current etc. As described above, the current through the coil produces a changing magnetic field. In block 1104, a sensor (e.g. sensor 10) is positioned relative to a target. Alternatively, the target may be positioned relative to the sensor. The target may be a conductive target, a ferromagnetic target, a magnet, an electromagnet, or another type of target that generates a magnetic field. In block 1106, a signal is generated representing the strength of the combined magnetic field from the coil and magnetic field from the target. The signal may be generated by sensing element 16, for example. In block 1108, the signal is compared to an expected magnetic field strength value. In block 1110, a signal is generated that represents changes to the expected magnetic field produced by the presence of target 12. The signal may represent the proximity of the target to the sensor. The signal may be used to calculate proximity, position, speed, and direction of the target, among other properties of the target.

[0087] FIG. 12 is a flowchart of another process 1200 for sensing a magnetic field. In block 1202, a non-ferromagnetic target is placed in proximity to magnetic field source. For example, the target 1001 in figure 10A may be placed in proximity to

sensor 1002 and/or 1004. In block 1204, a magnetic field is produced by a magnet or an electromagnet. The field intersects the target and can be sensed by sensing elements 1002 and/or 1004. In block 1206, an eddy current is induced in the target, and variations to the magnetic field caused by the eddy current are detected.

[0088] It is understood that exemplary embodiments of a magnetic sensors and systems that produce a changing magnetic field are applicable to a wide variety of applications. For example, in one embodiment, a magnetic sensor with an integrated coil is optimized for seat belt detection. In another embodiment, a magnetic sensor is optimized for seat position detection with air gaps in the order of about 0.5 to about 3 mm. In other embodiments the sensor may be optimized for air gaps as large as 1 cm. In another embodiment, a magnetic sensor is optimized to detect motion of an automotive transmission, wheel, or axle.

[0089] Having described preferred embodiments, which serve to illustrate various concepts, structures and techniques, which are the subject of this patent, it will now become apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that other embodiments incorporating these concepts, structures and techniques may be used. It will be appreciated that the various features shown and described in connection with the various embodiments can be selectively combined. Accordingly, it is submitted that that scope of the patent should not be limited to the described embodiments but rather should be limited only by the spirit and scope of the following claims. All references cited herein are hereby incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

1. A magnetic field sensor comprising:
a semiconductor substrate;
a coil configured to provide a changing magnetic field in response to a changing current in the coil; and
a magnetic field sensing element supported by the substrate to sense the magnetic field as affected by the presence of a ferromagnetic target.
2. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein the coil is formed from at least one metal layer disposed on a surface of the substrate.
3. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein the magnetic field sensing element is a giant magnetoresistive (GMR) transducer.
4. The magnetic field sensor of claim 3 wherein the GMR transducer comprises a plurality of GMR elements in a bridge configuration.
5. The magnetic field sensor of claim 4 wherein a first pair of GMR elements of the H-bridge is positioned at an end of the coil and a second pair of GMR elements of the bridge is positioned at an opposing end of the coil.
6. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein at least a portion of the magnetic field sensing element is positioned within a loop of the coil.
7. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein the magnetic field sensing element is a Hall element.
8. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 further including a current source coupled to the coil.
9. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 further including a pulsed or transient current source coupled to the coil.
10. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein the coil is positioned above or

below the substrate.

11. The magnetic field sensor of claim 1 wherein the coil is a separately formed element included in a same package with the substrate.

12. A method of detecting a magnetic field comprising:
providing a semiconductor substrate;
driving a changing current through a coil so that the coil generates an changing magnetic field; and
sensing, with a magnetic field sensing element supported by the substrate, variations in the changing magnetic field due to a proximity of a ferromagnetic target.

13. The method of claim 12 further comprising forming the inductive coil from one or more metal layers disposed on a surface of the substrate.

14. The method of claim 12 further comprising providing the magnetic field sensing element in the form of a plurality of GMR elements in an bridge configuration.

15. The method of claim 14 further comprising positioning a first pair of GMR elements of the bridge at an end of the inductive coil and positioning a second pair of GMR elements of the bridge at an opposing end of the inductive coil.

16. The method of claim 12 further comprising positioning at least a portion of the magnetic field sensing element within a loop of the inductive coil.

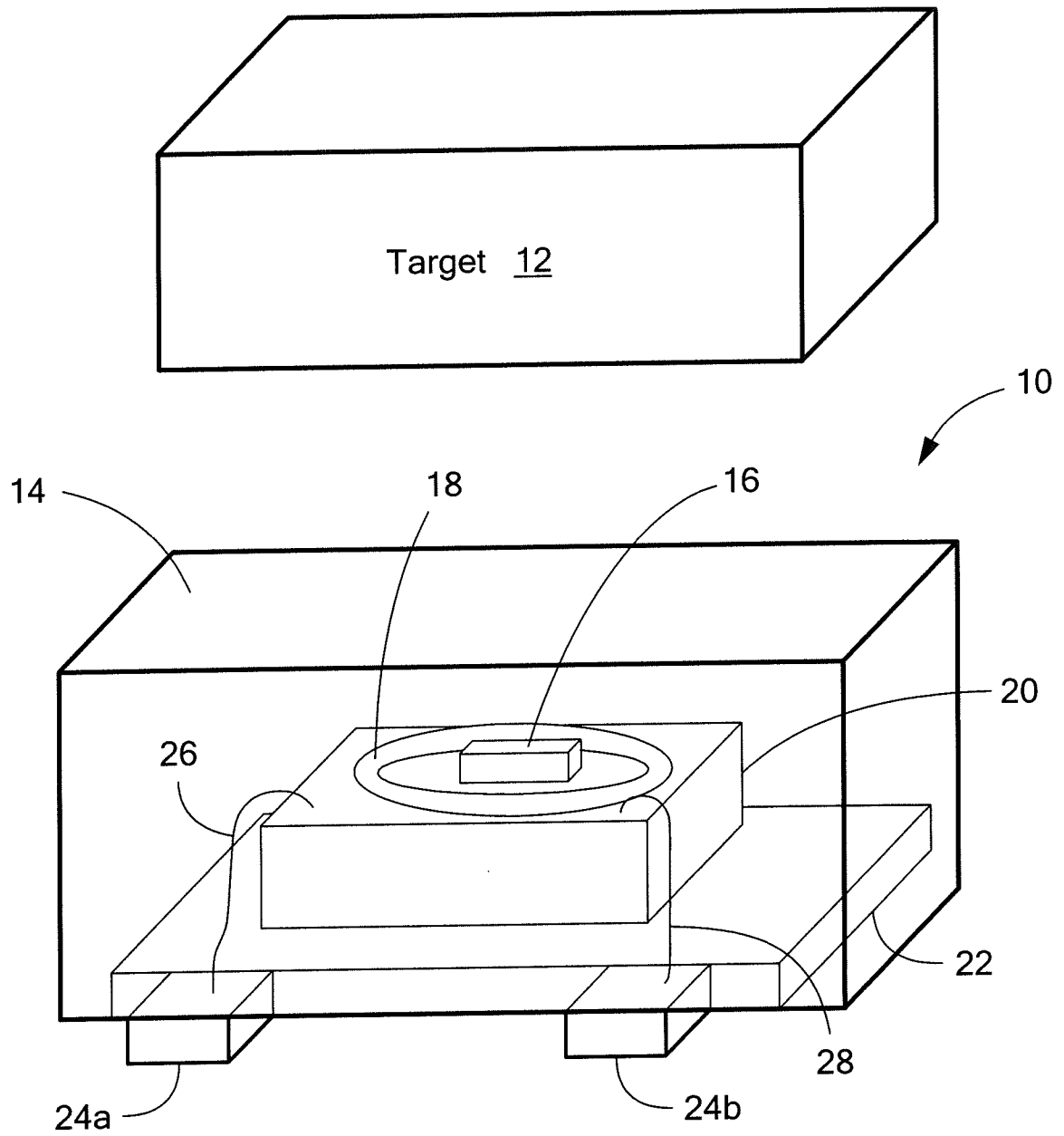
17. The method of claim 12 further comprising providing the magnetic field sensing element in the form of a Hall element

18. The method of claim 12 further comprising supplying a pulsed or transient current to the coil.

19. The method of claim 12 further comprising attaching the coil to a top or bottom surface of the substrate.

20. The method of claim 12 further comprising providing the coil as a separately formed element within a same package as the substrate.

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**FIG. 1**

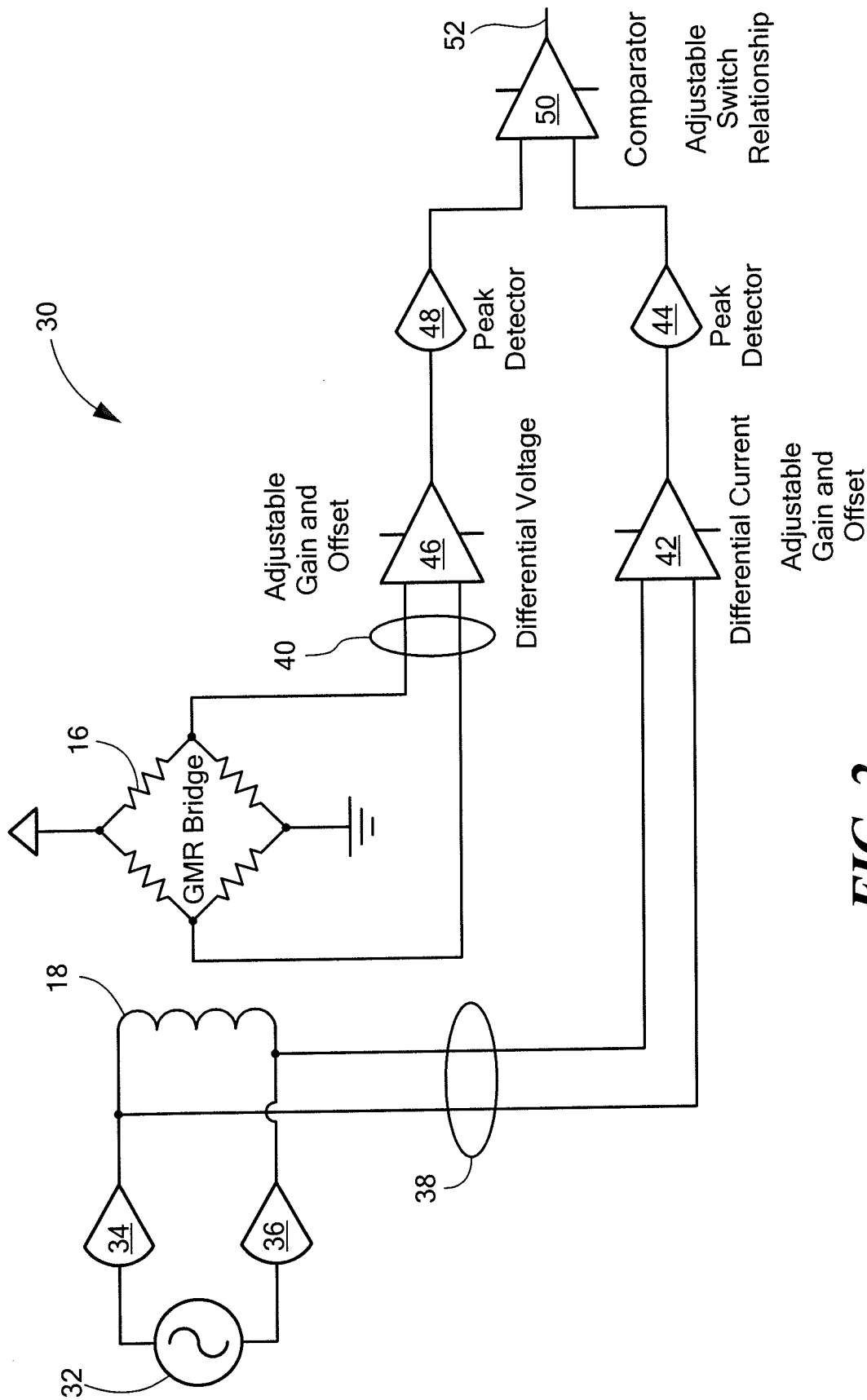


FIG. 2

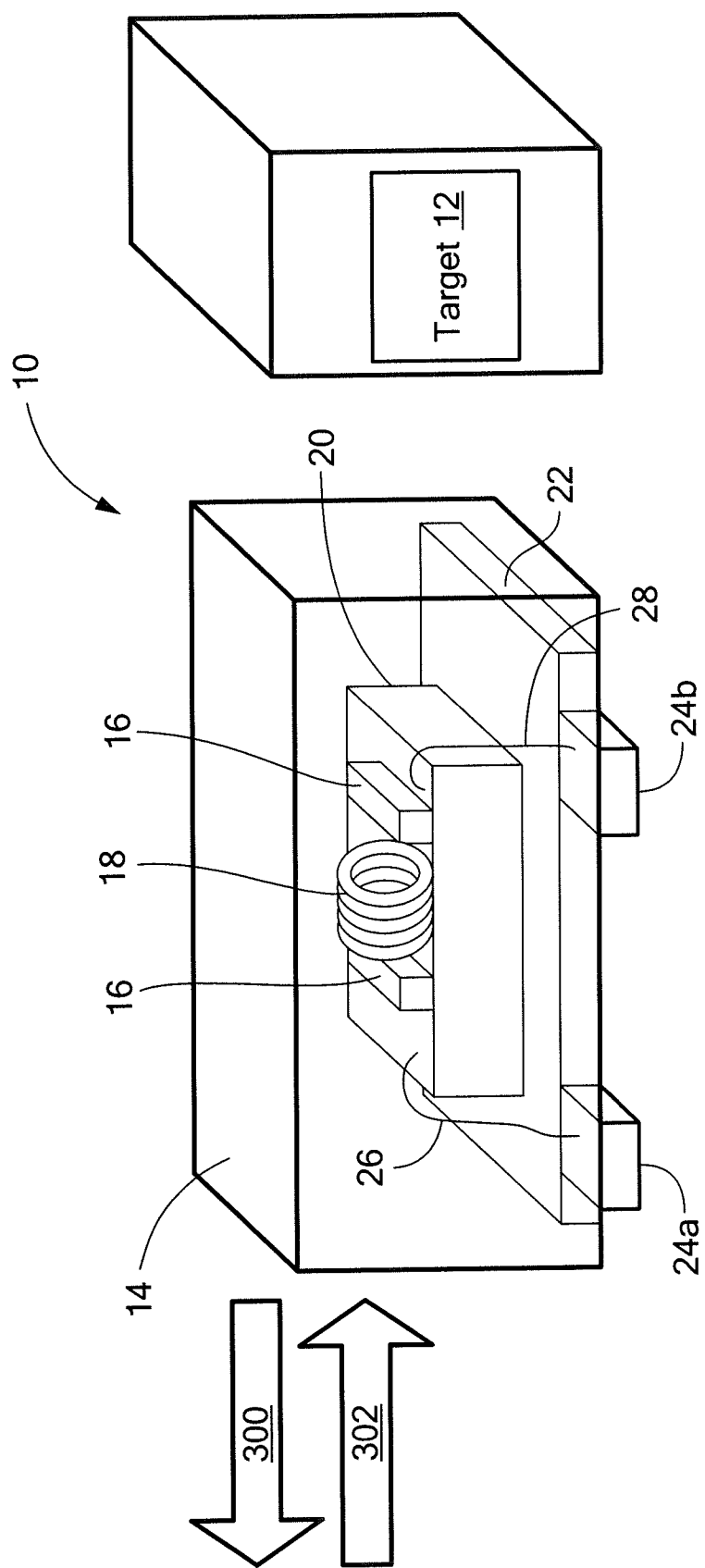
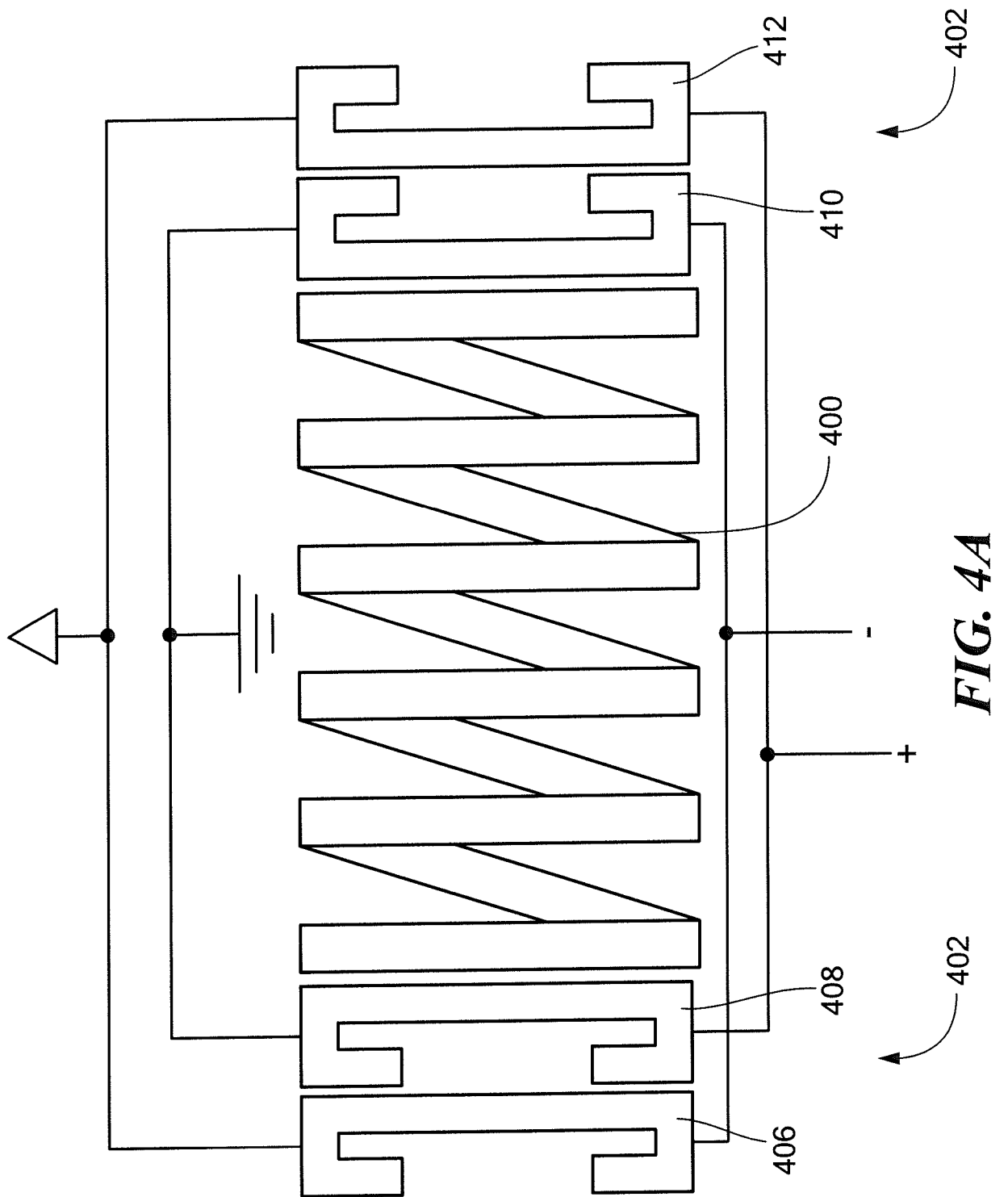


FIG. 3



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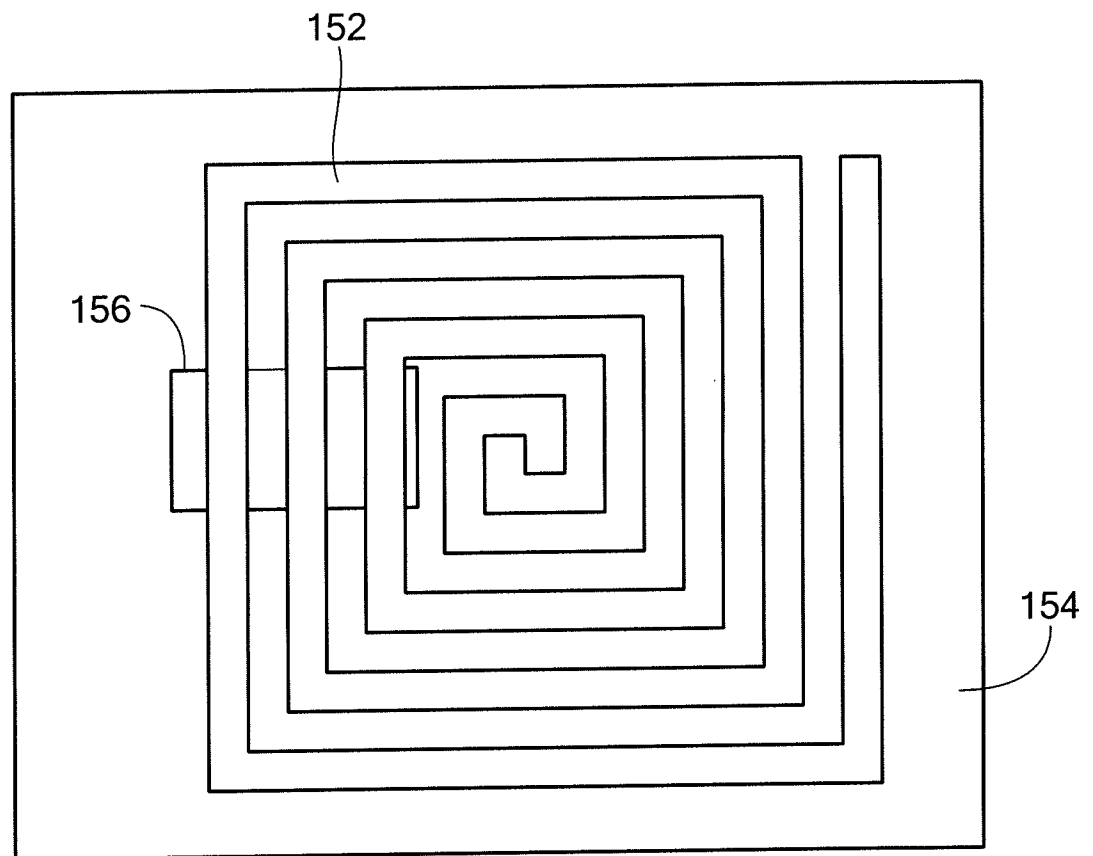


FIG. 4B

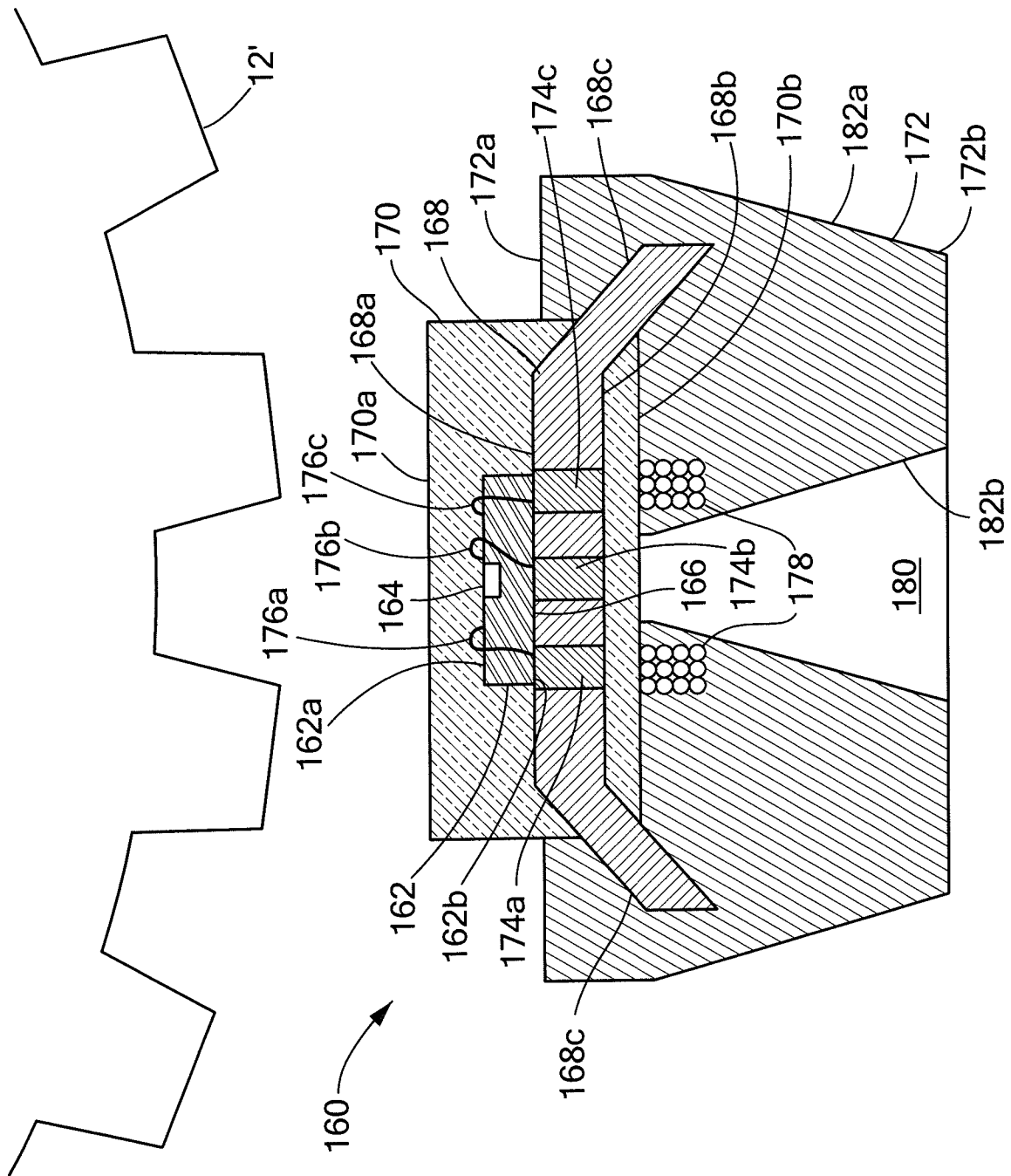


FIG. 5

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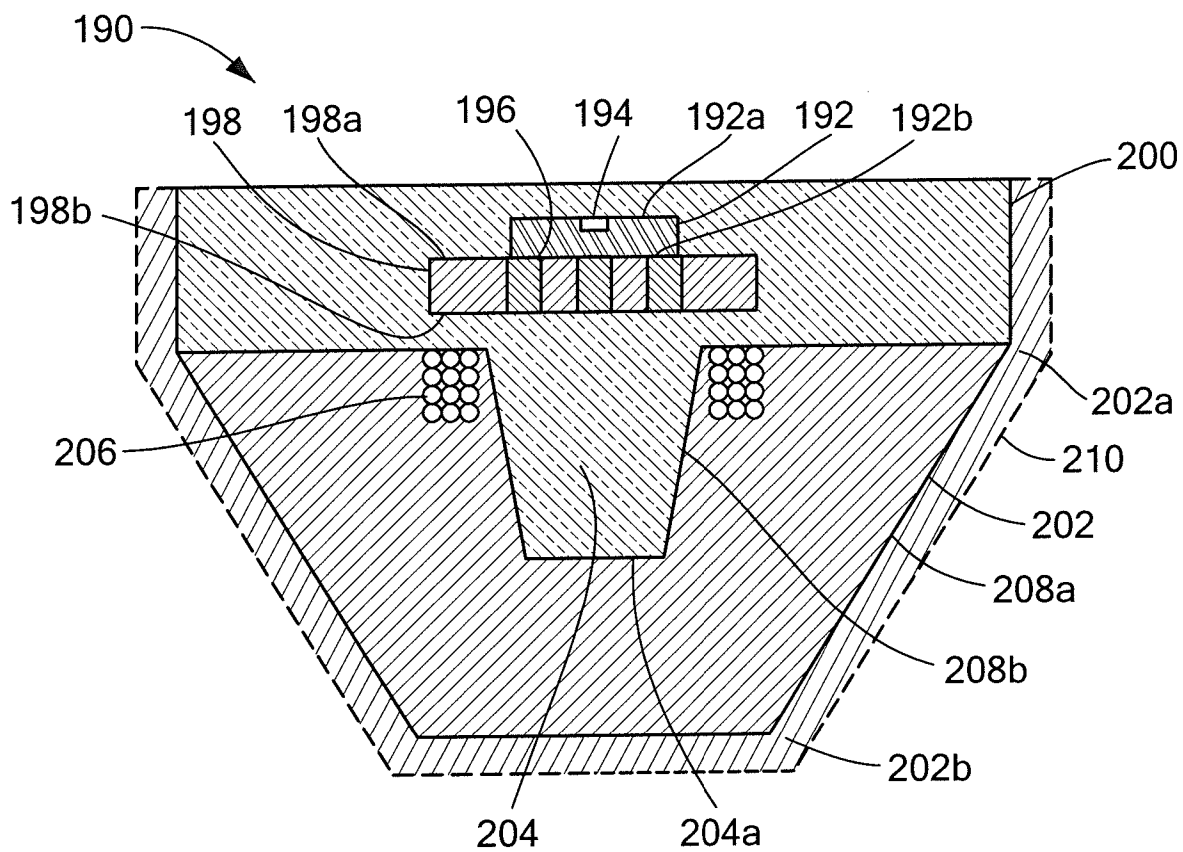


FIG. 6

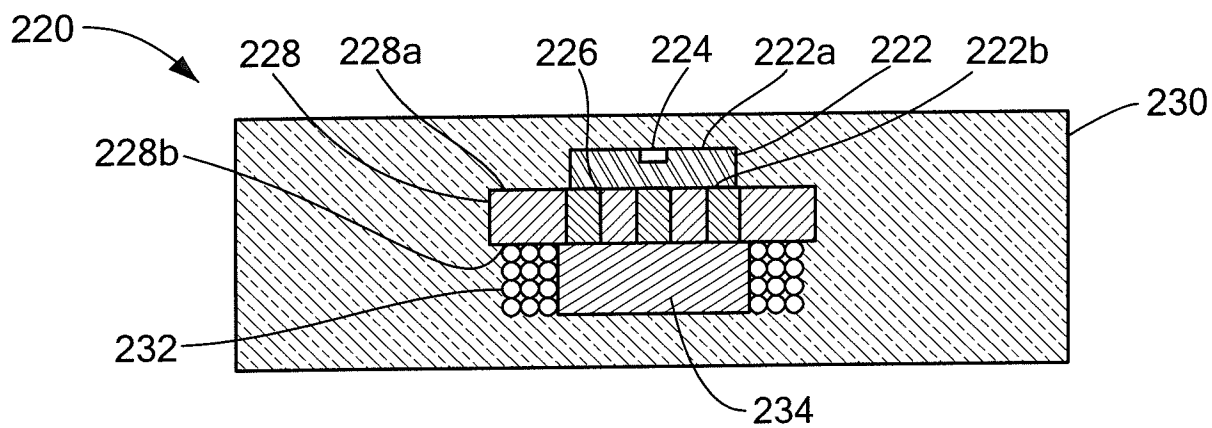


FIG. 7

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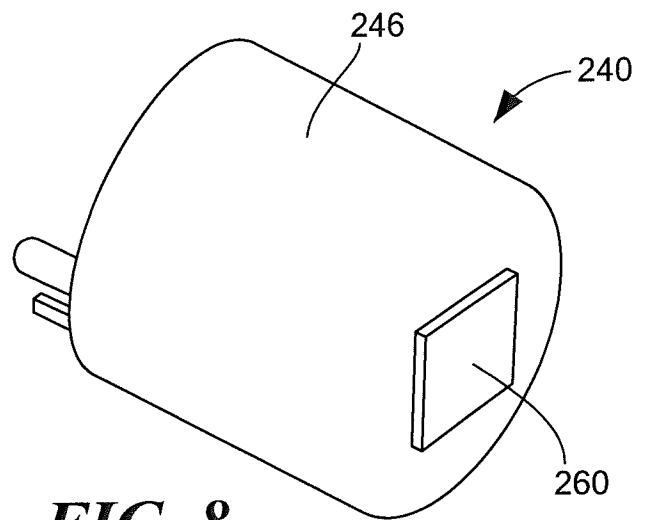


FIG. 8

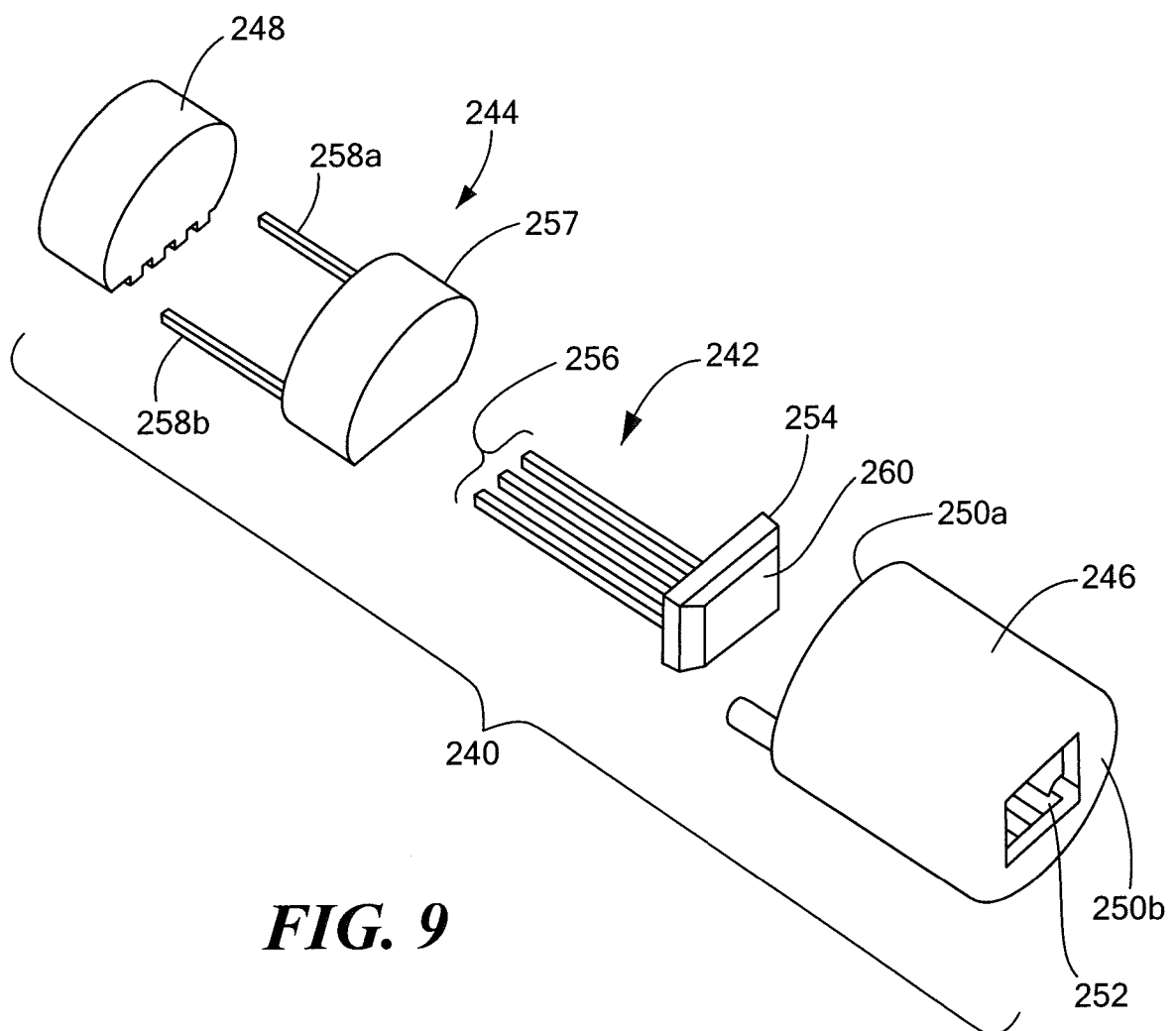


FIG. 9

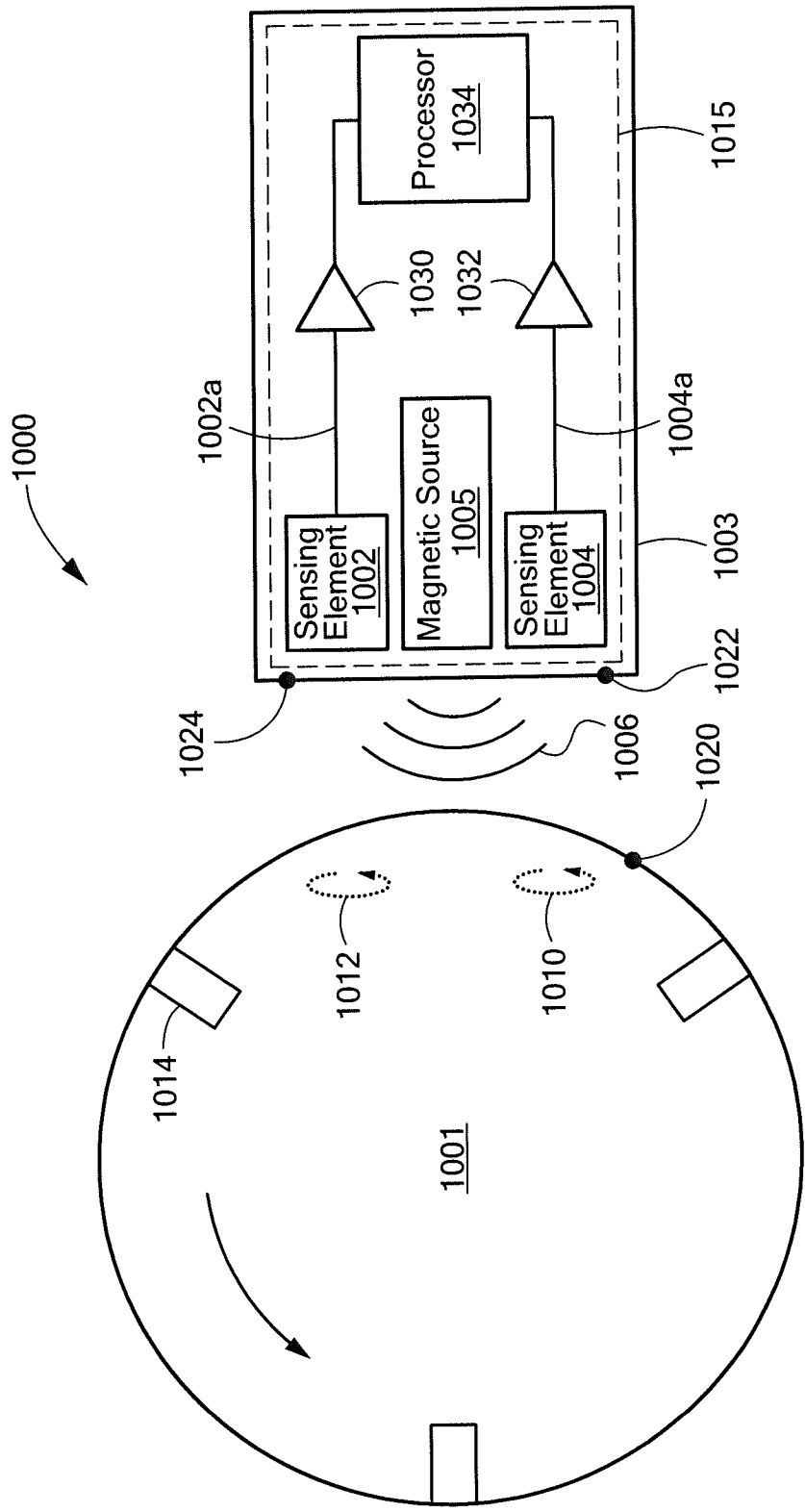


FIG. 10A

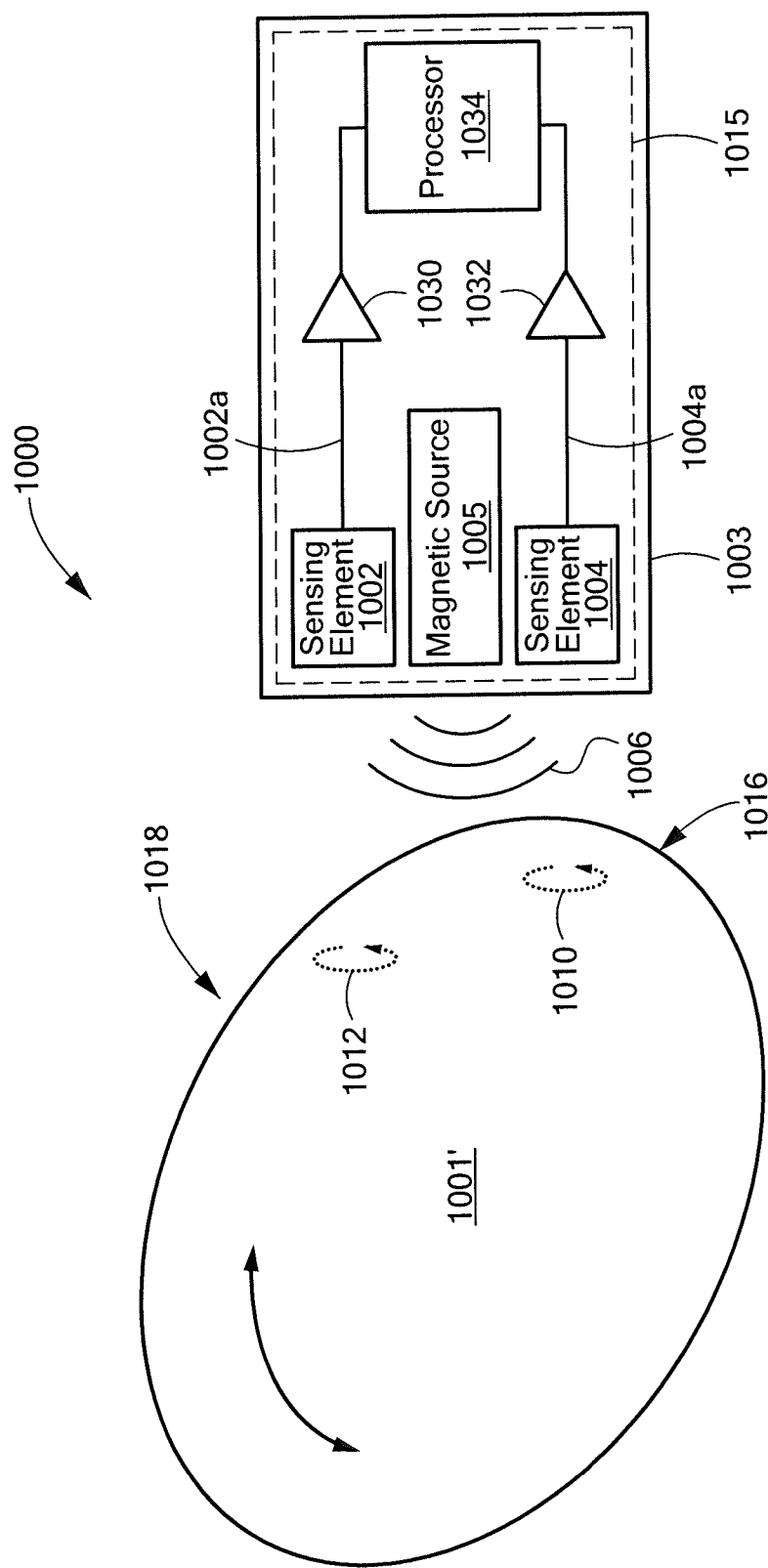
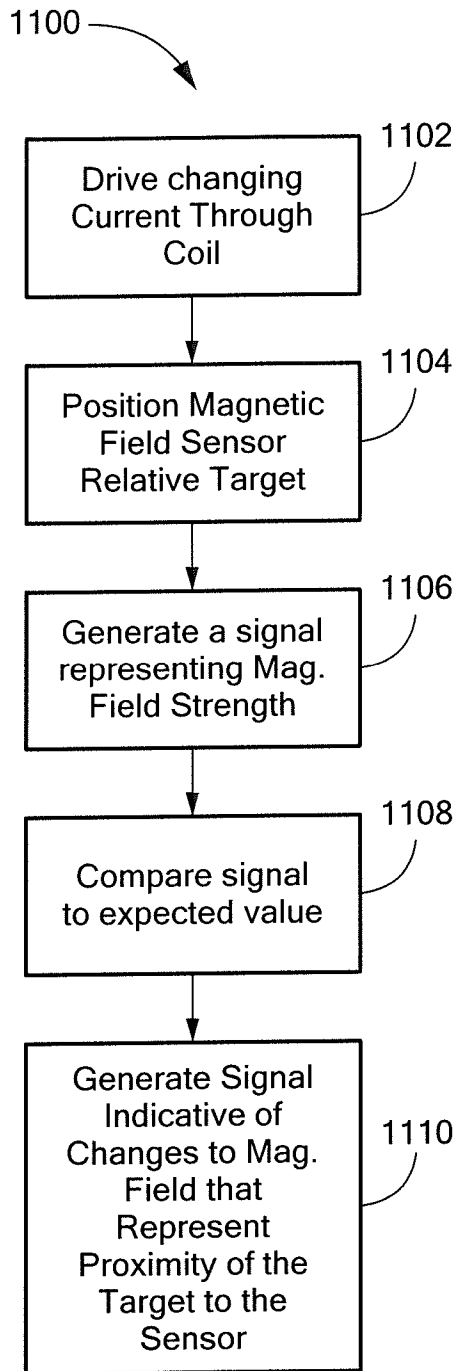
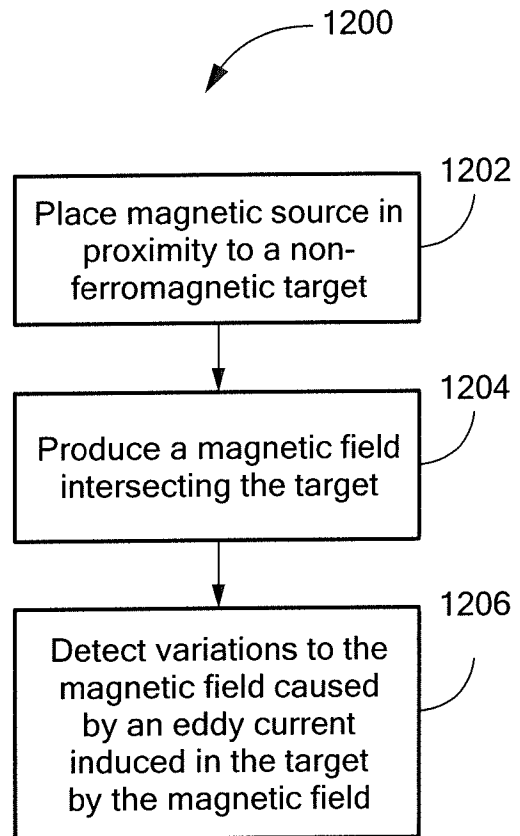


FIG. 10B

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**FIG. 11****FIG. 12**

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2014/044993

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

INV. G01R33/09

ADD. G01R33/00 G01R33/06 G01D5/14

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

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

G01R G01D

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

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

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

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Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

23 October 2014

Date of mailing of the international search report

03/11/2014

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Authorized officer

Hof, Klaus-Dieter

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2014/044993

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