PHALANGE TACTILE LOAD CELL

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(57) ABSTRACT

A tactile load cell that has particular application for measuring the load on a phalange in a dexterous robot system. The load cell includes a flexible strain element having first and second end portions that can be used to mount the load cell to the phalange and a center portion that can be used to mount a suitable contact surface to the load cell. The strain element also includes a first S-shaped member including at least three sections connected to the first end portion and the center portion and a second S-shaped member including at least three sections coupled to the second end portion and the center portion. The load cell also includes eight strain gauge pairs where each strain gauge pair is mounted to opposing surfaces of one of the sections of the S-shaped members where the strain gauge pairs provide strain measurements in six-degrees of freedom.

20 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets
PHALANGE TACTILE LOAD CELL

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The invention described herein may be manufactured and used by or for the U.S. Government for U.S. Government (i.e., non-commercial) purposes without the payment of royalties thereon or therefor.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to a load cell and, more particularly, to a tactile load cell for measuring the load on a phalange of a robotic finger or miniature manipulator where the load cell measures loads in six-degrees of freedom.

2. Description of the Related Art

Modern times have seen an increasing use of dexterous robot systems, especially in applications such as assembly lines and welding lines of manufacturing plants. This can be attributed to the high degree of precision and efficiency with which robots work. One latest development has been the introduction of autonomous robots, that is, robots which can perform desired tasks in unstructured environments without continuous human guidance. In applications where robotic arms are used, autonomous task control of the robotic system can be improved by obtaining detailed information about the load experienced at each contact point of the fingers attached to the arms. Monitoring the load acting on each section of a finger helps to ensure that the proper force is being exerted to accomplish a particular task. Further, unexpectedly high or low load observations can be used to identify malfunctions or undesirable conditions, such as slippage.

One existing technique used to measure the load experienced on the fingers of a robotic hand includes single axis contact sensors. However, the inability of such sensors to measure forces acting along more than one axis compromises the load resolution provided by the sensors.

Another known system uses commercial load cells to measure the load value. However, the load cells used in such systems typically have unacceptable sizes and cannot be housed inside every section of a finger of the robotic hand.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the teachings of the present invention, a tactile load cell is disclosed that has particular application for measuring the load on a phalange in a dexterous robot system. The load cell includes a flexible strain element having first and second end portions that can be used to mount the load cell to the phalange and a center portion that can be used to mount a suitable contact surface to the load cell. The strain element also includes a first S-shaped member including at least three sections connected to the first end portion and the center portion and a second S-shaped member including at least three sections coupled to the second end portion and the center portion. The load cell also includes eight strain gauge pairs where each strain gauge pair is mounted to opposing surfaces of one of the sections of the S-shaped members where the strain gauge pairs provide strain measurements in six-degrees of freedom.

Additional features of the present invention will become apparent from the following description and appended claims, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

FIG. 1 illustrates a tactile load cell for a robotic hand, according to one embodiment;
FIG. 2 illustrates a tactile load cell for a robotic hand, according to another embodiment;
FIG. 3 illustrates a tactile load cell for a robotic hand, according to another embodiment;
FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a finger for a dexterous robot system that employs the tactile load cell shown in FIG. 3; and
FIG. 5 is a perspective view of the load cell shown in FIG. 4 separated from the phalange and mounted to a mounting element in the phalange.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

The following discussion of the embodiments of the invention directed to a tactile load cell is merely exemplary in nature, and is in no way intended to limit the invention or its applications or uses. For example, the tactile load cell of the invention has specific application for measuring the load on a phalange of a robotic finger. However, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the tactile load cell of the invention may have other applications.

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a tactile load cell 10 that has particular application to measure the load on a phalange of a dexterous robot system. As will be discussed below, the load cell 10 is able to simultaneously measure force in six directions, namely, three linear directions and three rotational directions. The load cell 10 includes a single body strain element 12 made of a suitable flexible material, such as aluminum. As will be discussed below, the strain element 12 is designed to maximize the measureable bending strain within the range of design loads, and within the limited space available on the phalanges of the dexterous robot system. The strain element 12 can be a single piece member manufactured or molded from the flexible material, or can be an assembly of the various elements discussed below coupled together by a suitable technique. The strain element 12 includes a first end mounting portion 30 and a second end mounting portion 34 having holes 36 and 38 that allow the load cell 10 to be mounted at a desired location. The strain element 12 also includes a central mounting portion 32 provided to mount a suitable contact surface to the load cell 10.

The strain element 12 also includes a first S-shaped member 110 coupled to the first end mounting portion 30 and the central mounting portion 32 and a second S-shaped member 112 coupled to the second end mounting portion 34 and the central mounting portion 32, as shown. The S-shaped member 110 includes sections 40, 42 and 44 and the S-shaped member 112 includes sections 46, 48 and 50. In this non-limiting embodiment, the sections 40-50 are square or rectangular in cross-section, however, other shapes may be equally applicable.

In order to measure the strain on the S-shaped members 110 and 112, strain gauge pairs are provided on certain ones of the sections 40-50. Particularly, strain gauge pair 14 is provided on opposing sides of the section 44, strain gauge pair 16 is provided on the other opposing sides of the section 44, strain gauge pair 18 is provided on opposing sides of the section 42, strain gauge pair 20 is provided on the other opposing sides of the section 42, strain gauge pair 22 is provided on opposing sides of the section 50, strain gauge pair 24 is provided on the other opposing sides of the section 50, strain gauge pair 26 is provided on opposing sides of the section 46 and strain gauge pair 28 is provided on the other
FIG. 3 is a perspective view of a tactile load cell 76 having a strain element 78 shaped as an arch. The load cell 76 has the same elements as the load cell 10, but is formed in the arched configuration to better mount to a particular phalange of a dexterous robot system. Particularly, the load cell 76 includes end portions 58 and 62 and center mounting portion 60. Further, the strain element 78 includes a first curved member 114 having four rectangular shaped sections 64, 66, 68 and 116 and a second curved member 118 having four rectangular shaped sections 70, 72, 74 and 120. The first curved member 114 is coupled to the end portion 58 and the center portion 60 and the second curved member 118 is coupled to the end portion 62 and the center portion 60. The strain element 56 can be a single piece member molded or manufactured of a single piece of flexible material, such as aluminum, or can be an assembly of parts, where each of the first end portion 58, the second end portion 62, the center portion 60, the first curved portion 114, and the second curved member 118 are all separate members assembled together in a suitable manner. As with the load cell 10, strain gauge pairs are provided at the appropriate location of the sections 64-74, 130 and 132. The arched configuration of the load cell 76 will be measured by the appropriate strain gauge pairs. In one non-limiting embodiment, the strain gauge pairs 14-28 are semiconductor strain gauges, although other types of strain gauges may be applicable.

A plurality of electrical contactors 52 are provided on the mounting portions 30, 32 and 34 that provide an electrical connection to the strain gauge pairs 14-28, and allow connections from the load cell 10 to control circuitry (not shown).

FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a tactile load cell 54 similar to the load cell 10 and based on the same principals for providing measurement of strain in six-degrees of freedom. In this embodiment, the load cell 54 includes a strain element 56 having end mounting portions 58 and 62 and center mounting portion 60. Further, the strain element 56 includes a first curved member 114 having four rectangular shaped sections 64, 66, 68 and 116 and a second curved member 118 having four rectangular shaped sections 70, 72, 74 and 120. The first curved member 114 is coupled to the end portion 58 and the center portion 60 and the second curved member 118 is coupled to the end portion 62 and the center portion 60. The strain element 56 can be a single piece member molded or manufactured of a single piece of flexible material, such as aluminum, or can be an assembly of parts, where each of the first end portion 58, the second end portion 62, the center portion 60, the first curved portion 114, and the second curved member 118 are all separate members assembled together in a suitable manner. As with the load cell 10, strain gauge pairs are provided at the appropriate location of the sections 64-74, 130 and 132. The arched configuration of the load cell 54 will be measured by the appropriate strain gauge pairs. In one non-limiting embodiment, the strain gauge pairs 14-28 are semiconductor strain gauges, although other types of strain gauges may be applicable.

A plurality of electrical contactors 52 are provided on the mounting portions 30, 32 and 34 that provide an electrical connection to the strain gauge pairs 14-28, and allow connections from the load cell 10 to control circuitry (not shown).
member, a sixth strain gauge pair is mounted to two other opposing surfaces of the first section of the second S-shaped member, a seventh strain gauge pair is mounted to opposing surfaces of the second section of the second S-shaped member and an eighth strain gauge pair is mounted to two other opposing surfaces of the second section of the second S-shaped member.

4. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the sections of the first and second S-shaped members are rectangular in cross-section.

5. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the strain element is made of aluminum.

6. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the first and second end portions and the middle portion include mounting holes for mounting the load cell to a robotic finger.

7. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the first and second end portions include coupling slots.

8. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the strain element has a general U-shape.

9. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the first and second S-shaped members each include four separate sections.

10. The load cell according to claim 1 wherein the load cell is part of a phalange in a dexterous robotic system that measures load on the phalange.

11. A tactile load cell comprising:

   a flexible strain element including a first end portion, a second end portion and a center portion, said strain element further including a first S-shaped member including three sections and being coupled to the first end portion and the center portion and a second S-shaped member including three sections and being coupled to the second end portion and the center portion, said first and second S-shaped members having a curved configuration so that the strain element has a general U-shape; and

   eight strain gauge pairs mounted to the first and second S-shaped members where each strain gauge pair is mounted to opposing sides of one of the sections of the S-shaped members and where the first S-shaped member includes four of the strain gauge pairs and the second S-shaped member includes the other four of the strain gauge pairs, said eight strain gauge pairs providing strain measurements in six-degrees of freedom, wherein at least one of the strain gauge pairs is mounted to opposing sides of one of the three sections of the first or second S-shaped member and another of the strain gauge pairs is mounted to two other opposing sides of the same section that the at least one strain gauge pair is mounted to.

12. The load cell according to claim 11 wherein the first and second S-shaped members are rectangular in cross-section.

13. The load cell according to claim 11 wherein the sections of the first and second S-shaped members are rectangular in cross-section.

14. The load cell according to claim 11 wherein the strain element is made of aluminum.

15. The load cell according to claim 11 wherein the load cell is part of a phalange in a dexterous robotic system that measures load on the phalange.

16. A tactile load cell for measuring strain in a phalange of a dexterous robotic system, said load cell comprising:

   a flexible strain element including a first end portion, a second end portion and a center portion, said strain element further including a first S-shaped member having at least three sections and being coupled to the first end portion and the center portion and a second S-shaped member having at least three sections and being coupled to the second end portion and the center portion; and

   eight strain gauge pairs mounted to the first and second S-shaped members such that each strain gauge pair is mounted to opposing sides of one of the sections of the S-shaped member, wherein the first S-shaped member includes four of the strain gauge pairs and the second of the S-shaped members includes the other four of the strain gauge pairs and wherein the strain gauge pairs provide strain measurements and six-degrees of freedom, wherein at least one of the strain gauge pairs is mounted to opposing sides of one of the three sections of the first or second S-shaped member and another of the strain gauge pairs is mounted to two other opposing sides of the same section that the at least one strain gauge pair is mounted to.

17. The load cell according to claim 16 wherein the strain element has a general U-shape.

18. The load cell according to claim 16 wherein the first and second end portions include coupling slots.

19. The load cell according to claim 16 wherein the first and second end portions include coupling slots.

20. The load cell according to claim 16 wherein the strain element is made of aluminum.