

OMNI-DIRECTIONAL WHEEL ASSEMBLY AND OMNI-DIRECTIONAL VEHICLE

The present invention relates to a wheel assembly and especially to an Omni-directional wheel assembly and to an electric Omni-directional vehicle equipped with such Omni-directional wheel assembly.

Different ways to provide Omni-directional vehicles are known from the prior art. For example, the document WO2010/150286 describes a five wheel vehicle. Each wheel is able to rotate at 360° around a pivot line, so that the vehicle is able to move in all the directions. The vehicle is powered by a central wheel equipped with an electric motor. The pivot lines of the front and rear wheels may be inclined frontward or rearward. This vehicle presents the disadvantage of having an unstable behavior in situations when it moves in a transverse direction, as the position of the pivot lines result in asymmetrical stress on the tires and does not provide any self centering for the steering. This phenomenon is made worse if the wheel is powered as the traction force also creates an additional pull back force to the wheel when it is rotated around the pivot line. This drawback results in safety issues as the vehicle may create violent reactions that may endanger the occupants, in some emergency situations such as an emergency evasive maneuver: the wheels will not have a stable position in the new transverse direction of movement and this will create negative reactions to the change of direction. It should be also noted that this architecture leads to an increased abrasion on the tires reducing their lifetime. The proposed central wheel present no caster angle or distance: its stability is questionable at high speeds. Another source of efficiency loss is the unique powered central wheel. If the power has to be increased, the motor will be enlarged and its weight will increase significantly, leading in issues to withstand the induced effects of the unsprung mass. Another point is that this central powered wheel makes the vehicle very

sensitive to the road conditions and its traction may easily be lowered as if the unique powered wheel meets reduced adherence conditions, no other powered wheel will be able to compensate the reduction of traction force. Lastly, this vehicle presents a technical complexity leading to cost increase,
5 as the peripheral wheels have a first configuration and the central one present another design, so that the parts cannot be standardized to lower the costs.

The document US 3 404 746 describes another example of omni-directional vehicle. The vehicle has five wheels, four swivel casters located at
10 the corners and one 360° steering wheel powered by a motor located on the vehicle frame. The use of swivel casters leads to a technical complexity with a double suspension arm to allow a vertical movement to the wheels. Moreover, to have a correct stability, the distance between the wheel axle and steering joint, the trailing distance, has to be important and then the
15 assembly requires a great free space to allow the wheel to rotate around the pivot line or treeing axis. These disadvantages are well known and this is the reason why this design is not used in the automotive industry and is limited to the area of aircrafts. Concerning the motor, the transmission of the power from the motor to the wheel is complex and expensive.

20 The present invention aims to solve these aforementioned drawbacks and is directed to propose first an omni-directional wheel assembly able to provide great stability whatever the direction of movement of the vehicle, with an ability also to adapt the stability of the wheel assembly in real time to the travelling conditions of the vehicle. A second aim is to provide the ability to
25 adapt a vehicle to user's requirements of performance.

With this goal in mind, a first aspect of the invention is an omni-directional wheel assembly for a vehicle comprising a wheel and at least one lower suspension link and an upper attachment joint, both being able to be attached to the vehicle, the wheel being able to rotate at 360°, to steer the
30 vehicle, around a pivot line positioned by said at least one lower suspension link and said upper attachment joint once attached to the vehicle, a projection

of the pivot line onto a vertical projection plane comprising a vertical axis passing through a contact point between the wheel and ground defining a caster angle with said vertical axis, characterized in that whatever the orientation of the projection plane, the omni-directional wheel assembly
5 comprises adjustment means able to adjust the caster angle within a predetermined range. The invention supplies a wheel assembly able to rotate at 360° around its pivot axis with a controlled stability as the caster angle is able to be adjusted accordingly. In other words, the Omni-directional wheel assembly according to the present invention is able to adjust the caster angle
10 to the direction steered by the wheel, at 360° around a vertical axis. In consequence, the stability of such wheel assembly is enhanced, as there is no back force exerted by the tire to pull back the wheel in the vehicle longitudinal direction. The steering mechanism necessary to command such wheel assembly may also be simplified as the efforts exerted will be lowered.
15 The use of the invention provides an enhanced stability of the vehicle, but also allows cost and weight reduction on the steering mechanism.

Advantageously, the adjustment means are able to set up the caster angle at a first predetermined value corresponding to standard driving conditions and at least at a second predetermined value corresponding to
20 emergency driving conditions. The invention provides the ability to adjust the caster angle to different transportation conditions (in city or on highways), to optimize the vehicle handling. In other words, the adjustment means are able to adjust the orientation of the caster angle at a first value if standard comfort and stability are desired, or if maximum stability or adherence are required
25 such as an evasive collision avoidance maneuver, to a second value.

Advantageously, the adjustment means are able to adjust the caster angle during driving conditions, in response to a command related to driving conditions. The invention simplifies the use of the wheel assembly as the adjustment is automatic in real time, in response to a command sent by a
30 command unit of the vehicle for example. It may be also possible to have a

mechanical link between the steering mechanism and the adjustment means to provide the automatic adjustment function.

Ideally, the adjustment means are able to adjust the position of the upper attachment joint. The Omni-directional wheel assembly according to
5 the present invention is easy to use, as the adjustment of the pivot line orientation is enabled by a movement of the upper attachment joint. There is no need to modify the lower suspension links which are generally complex, heavy and subjected to high forces. The upper attachment joint is easily moveable in regard to the low-efforts applied to this joint.

10 Advantageously, the upper attachment joint comprises a case able to rotate around a reference axis, further comprises a ball pivot belonging to the pivot line, the ball pivot is mounted in the case at a predetermined distance from the reference axis and the rotation of the case around the reference axis is able to adjust the caster angle. This embodiment to set up in 360° the
15 value of the caster angle is economic as the ball pivot belonging to the pivot line is mounted in an eccentric case, and the rotation of the eccentric case will orientate the pivot angle in the proper direction.

Ideally, the predetermined distance is adjustable. This embodiment makes the adjustment to the two different values economic and easy to set
20 up. It is the distance that will set the caster angle at the desired value.

Advantageously, the Omni-directional wheel assembly comprises a steering mechanism able to steer the wheel. The assembly may directly comprise the steering mechanism, the rest of the vehicle will be simplified.

Advantageously, the Omni-directional wheel assembly comprises a
25 brake able to brake the wheel. The assembly may comprise a braking device, so that, upon request, it is easy to modulate the functions supplied by the assembly.

Advantageously, the Omni-directional wheel assembly comprises at least one electric motor able to rotate the wheel around a spinning axis to
30 apply a moving force on the vehicle. The modularity is complete; as such

assembly may power the vehicle. The assembly is able to respond to different requirements from the user, as it may steer, brake, or power the vehicle. It is easy to adapt the vehicle to the user needs. It may be foreseen to propose to the public a vehicle with one powered wheel for city or summer
5 use, and to supply powered wheel assemblies to replace the non-powered wheel assemblies if the client wants to increase the power or the traction ability if the adherence is poor, as it may be under winter conditions.

The invention is also related to a vehicle comprising at least four omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 8,
10 characterized in that two of said omni-directional wheel assemblies are powered, each powered omni-directional wheel assembly comprising at least one electric motor able to rotate the wheel around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle, and in that the said two powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are arranged on the vehicle so that the vertical
15 projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation. The vehicle according to the present invention includes wheel assemblies according the first aspect. Thus, the stability of the vehicle is increased in all the directions of driving, even when the vehicle is moving in a transverse
20 direction. This is particularly important in an evasive driving maneuver, in emergency conditions. Moreover, the arrangement of the wheel assemblies on the vehicle, with zero vertical torque applied on the vehicle, simplifies the design, as whatever the direction of movement, the non-powered wheels will not have to withstand any vertical torque. In other words, in a purely
25 transverse direction of movement, thanks to the arrangement of the powered wheel assemblies, the non-powered wheels are not required to have a steering mechanism, as in the absence of vertical torque on the vehicle, it is not necessary to steer all the wheels. The non powered wheel may be simple free wheels and consequently, the cost is reduced.

30 Advantageously, the said two powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are located symmetrically with respect to a central point of the

vehicle. This embodiment is advantageous to nullify the vertical torque created by the traction forces.

The invention is also related to a vehicle comprising at least five omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in any one of claims claim 1 to 8, characterized in that three of said Omni-directional wheel assemblies are powered, each powered omni-directional wheel assembly comprising at least an electric motor able to rotate the wheel around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle, and in that the said three powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are arranged on the vehicle so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation. The vehicle according to the present invention includes wheel assemblies according the first aspect. Thus, the stability of the vehicle is increased in all the directions of driving, even when the vehicle is moving in a transverse direction. This is particularly important in an evasive driving maneuver, in emergency conditions. Moreover, the arrangement of the wheel assemblies on the vehicle, with zero vertical torque applied on the vehicle, simplifies the design, as whatever the direction of movement, the non-powered wheels will not have to withstand any vertical torque. In other words, in a purely transverse direction of movement, thanks to the arrangement of the powered wheel assemblies, the non-powered wheels are not required to have a steering mechanism, as in the absence of vertical torque on the vehicle, it is not necessary to steer all the wheels. The non powered wheel may be simple free wheels and consequently, the cost is reduced.

Advantageously, a first powered omni-directional wheel assembly is located at a central point of the vehicle and in that the two other powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are located symmetrically with respect to the first powered omni-directional wheel assembly. This embodiment is advantageous to nullify the vertical torque created by the traction forces.

The invention is also related to a vehicle comprising at least five omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in claim 9, characterized in that said

omni-directional wheel assemblies are located on the vehicle so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation. The vehicle according to the present invention includes wheel
5 assemblies according the first aspect. Thus, the stability of the vehicle is increased in all the directions of driving, even when the vehicle is moving in a transverse or oblique direction. This is particularly important in an evasive driving maneuver, in emergency conditions. Moreover, the arrangement of the wheel assemblies on the vehicle, with zero vertical torque applied on the
10 vehicle, simplifies the design, as whatever the direction of movement, the wheels will not have to withstand any vertical torque.

The invention is also related to a vehicle comprising at least five omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in any one of claims claim 1 to 8, characterized in that at least five of said omni-directional wheel assemblies
15 are powered, each powered omni-directional wheel assembly comprising at least an electric motor able to rotate the wheel around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle, and in that the said at least five powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are arranged on the vehicle so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle
20 is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation. The vehicle according to the present embodiment is optimized for large capacities of transportation. It may be a bus or a truck, and its ability to move in all directions is real as the stability is given by the wheel assemblies according to the first aspect. Traveling in crowded city conditions or parking
25 the vehicle for loading or unloading is now easy with the present invention. Safety of long and/or heavy load vehicles such as busses or trailer trucks is also enhanced as the adjustment of the caster angle will improve their behavior and braking performance to prevent risks of sliding out or jackknifing.

30 Other characteristics and advantages of the present invention will appear more clearly from the following detailed description of particular non-

limitative examples of the invention, illustrated by the appended drawings where:

- Figure 1 represents a perspective view of an omni-directional wheel assembly according to the invention;
- 5 - Figure 2 represents a side view of the omni-directional wheel assembly of figure 1;
- Figure 3 represents a front view of the omni-directional wheel assembly of figure 1;
- Figure 4 represents a partial view of the omni-directional wheel
10 assembly of figure 1;
- Figure 5 represents a top view of a vehicle according to an embodiment of the invention;
- Figure 6 represents a top view of the vehicle of figure 5;
- Figure 7 represents a top view of a vehicle according to another
15 embodiment of the invention;
- Figure 8 represents a top view of the vehicle of figure 7;

The omni-directional wheel assembly represented at Figure 1 comprises a wheel 10 mounted on a fork 25 and able to rotate at 360°
20 around the pivot line 90. This ability allows the vehicle equipped with such omni-directional wheel assembly to steer in all the directions. The user can easily steer the vehicle to park in small-access lots or to move in traffic jam conditions. In this aim, the assembly is equipped with a steering mechanism 50 comprising a steering electric motor 51 engaged with a circular steering
25 rack. Additionally, the assembly further comprises two electric motors 60, 65 to apply a moving force to the vehicle although one motor may suffice and a brake device 70 to stop the vehicle if needed. The suspension assembly 40 comprises a suspension spring associated to a suspension damper. The assembly is linked to the vehicle by a lower suspension arm 20 and an upper

attachment joint 30. These two elements define the geometry of the wheel assembly in vehicle and especially the caster angle which is the projection of the pivot line 90 on a vertical projections plane comprising a vertical axis passing through a contact point of the tire with the ground. The invention
5 provides an adjustable caster angle in all directions, as the upper attachment joint 30 is able to move the upper position of the pivot line 90 by rotating around the reference axis 95. To allow the conical movement of the pivot line 90, the fork 25 is linked to the lower suspension arm through a pivot joint which allows the necessary three rotations between these two parts.

10 Figure 2 represents a side view of the omni-directional wheel assembly of figure 1. The adjustment of the caster angle in any direction is permitted by the distance between the two axes 90 and 95. The upper point 91 of the pivot line 90 is mounted in an eccentric part of the attachment joint 30 able to rotate around the reference axis 95. This allows the adjustment in
15 all the directions of the caster angle.

Figure 3 is a front view of the omni-directional wheel assembly of the figure 1, showing the distance between the axis 90 and 95 that permit the adjustment of the caster angle.

The figure 4 shows in detail the upper attachment joint 30. A pivot ball
20 32 belongs to the pivot axis and its center, the point 91 is the upper point of the pivot line 90. The pivot ball 32 is mounted in an eccentric case 35 able to rotate around the axis 95 under the command of the electric motor 38. The distance between the two axes 90 and 95, in association with the angular position of the eccentric case 35 define the value of the caster angle which is
25 the projection of the pivot line 90 onto a vertical projection plane. Since the eccentric case 35 is able to rotate around the reference axis 95, the caster angle is adjustable, whatever the orientation of the vertical projection line. One variant may also have the distance between the two axes adjustable. Consequently, the caster angle may be adjusted by the rotation of the
30 eccentric case and/or by modifying the distance between the axis 90 and 95.

Figure 5 represents a top view of an omni-directional vehicle including the omni-directional wheel assembly previously described. The vehicle 100 comprise four wheels 10A, 10B, 10C, 10D. Two of these wheels are powered, the wheels 10A and 10C. They are arranged symmetrically with respect to the central point 110, which may be the center of gravity. In consequence, the two powered wheel assemblies 10A, 10C will apply moving forces to the vehicle, and with the symmetrical arrangement of the powered wheels 10A, 10C, the vertical moment applied to the vehicle is null.

Figure 6 represents a top view of the omni-directional vehicle of figure 5, in particular driving conditions. The four wheels 10A, 10B, 10C, 10D are oriented in the same direction. It may be for moving the vehicle to a small access area or to avoid an obstacle. With the symmetrical arrangement of the powered wheels 10A, 10C, the vertical moment resulting from the moving forces applied to the vehicle, the stability is enhanced and there is not any interference effort applied to the vehicle. This point is crucial in emergency situations where the adherence may be lost if there are unexpected reaction efforts applied to the vehicle. In addition, the adjustment of the caster angle provided by the wheel assemblies according to the first aspect of the invention, the behavior of the vehicle in direction changes is secured and enhanced.

Figure 7 and figure 8 represent top views of a five omni-directional wheels 10A, 10B, 10C, 10D, 10E vehicle according to the invention, having three powered omni-directional wheels 10A, 10C, 10E. The powered wheels are symmetrically arranged with respect to the central point of the vehicle: one first powered omni-directional wheel 10E is arranged at the central point, and the two other powered omni-directional wheels are arranged symmetrically with respect to the central wheel. The same stability advantages as described at figure 6 are obtained, but the vehicle has more power and is also less sensitive to slippage if the vehicle is driven by poor adherence conditions.

It is understood that obvious improvements and/or modifications for one skilled in the art may be implemented, being under the scope of the invention as it is defined by the appended claims. Especially, it is may be foreseen to use the invention on a four wheel drive vehicle. Concerning the
5 adjustment of the caster angle, it may be planned to use linear mobile joints to vary the distance between the reference axis and the pivot line. It is also possible to control automatically, independently or simultaneously each caster angle of each wheel assembly equipping a vehicle. It should be noted that the invention may also be used for a bi-directional steering vehicle.

CLAIMS

1. Omni-directional wheel assembly for vehicle comprising a wheel (10) and at least one lower suspension link (20) and an upper attachment joint (30), both being able to be attached to the vehicle, the wheel (10) being
5 able to rotate at 360°, to steer the vehicle, around a pivot line (90) positioned by said at least one lower suspension link (20) and said upper attachment joint (30) once attached to the vehicle, a projection of the pivot line (90) onto a vertical projection plane comprising a vertical axis passing through a contact point between the wheel (10) and ground defining a caster angle with
10 said vertical axis, characterized in that whatever the orientation of the projection plane, the omni-directional wheel assembly comprises adjustment means able to adjust the caster angle within a predetermined range.

2. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the adjustment means are able to set up the caster
15 angle at a first predetermined value corresponding to standard driving conditions and at least at a second predetermined value corresponding to emergency driving conditions.

3. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the adjustment means are able to adjust the caster
20 angle during driving conditions, in response to a command related to driving conditions.

4. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 3, characterized in that the adjustment means are able to adjust the position of the upper attachment joint (30).

25 5. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 4, characterized in that the upper attachment joint comprises a case (35) able to rotate around a reference axis (95), further comprises a ball pivot (32) belonging to the pivot line (90), in that the ball pivot (32) is mounted in the case (35) at a predetermined distance from the reference axis (95) and

in that the rotation of the case (35) around the reference axis (95) is able to adjust the caster angle.

6. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in claim 5, characterized in that the predetermined distance is adjustable.

5 7. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 6, characterized in that it comprises a steering mechanism (50) able to steer the wheel (10).

8. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 7, characterized in that it comprises a brake (70) able to brake the
10 wheel (10).

9. Omni-directional wheel assembly as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 8, characterized in that it comprises at least one electric motor (60, 65) able to rotate the wheel (10) around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle.

15 10. Vehicle (100) comprising at least four omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10B, 10C, 10D) as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 8, characterized in that two of said omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10C) are powered, each powered omni-directional wheel assembly (10A, 10C) comprising at least one electric motor (60, 65) able to rotate the wheel
20 (10) around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle (100), and in that the said two powered omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10C) are arranged on the vehicle (100) so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle (100) is null when all the omni-directional wheel (10A, 10B, 10C, 10D) assemblies have the same
25 orientation.

11. Vehicle as claimed in claim 10, characterized in that the said two powered omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10C) are located symmetrically with respect to a central point (110) of the vehicle.

12. Vehicle (100) comprising at least five omni-directional (10A, 10B, 10C, 10D, 10E) wheel assemblies as claimed in any one of claims claim 1 to 8, characterized in that three of said Omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10C, 10E) are powered, each powered omni-directional wheel
5 assembly (10A, 10C, 10E) comprising at least one electric motor (60, 65) able to rotate the wheel (10) around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle (100), and in that the said three powered omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10C, 10E) are arranged on the vehicle (100) so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the
10 vehicle (100) is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies (10A, 10B, 10C, 10D, 10E) have the same orientation.

13. Vehicle (100) as claimed in claim 12, characterized in that a first powered omni-directional wheel assembly (10E) is located at a central point of the vehicle (100) and in that the two other powered omni-directional wheel
15 assemblies (10A, 10C) are located symmetrically with respect to the first powered omni-directional wheel assembly (10E).

14. Vehicle comprising at least five omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in claim 9, characterized in that said omni-directional wheel assemblies are located on the vehicle so that the vertical projection of
20 the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle is null when all the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation.

15. Vehicle comprising at least five omni-directional wheel assemblies as claimed in any one of claims claim 1 to 8, characterized in that at least five of said omni-directional wheel assemblies are powered, each
25 powered omni-directional wheel assembly comprising at least one electric motor able to rotate the wheel around a spinning axis to apply a moving force on the vehicle, and in that the said at least five powered omni-directional wheel assemblies are arranged on the vehicle so that the vertical projection of the moment created by the moving forces on the vehicle is null when all
30 the omni-directional wheel assemblies have the same orientation.