

Method and Device for Producing a Plurality of Microlenses

Specification

This invention relates to a method for producing a plurality of microlenses from a lens material as claimed in Claim 1. Furthermore this invention relates to a device for producing a plurality of microlenses from a lens material as claimed in Claim 8.

Microlenses are used primarily for devices which require an optical focusing apparatus, such as for example cameras of mobile phones. As a result of miniaturization pressure the functional areas are becoming smaller and smaller. The farther the microlenses are to be miniaturized, the more difficult their optically correct production becomes because at the same time there is enormous cost pressure for the microlenses which are ideally to be manufactured in mass production. In the prior art microlenses are produced on a carrier substrate by different production methods, such as shown for example in US 6,846,137 B1, US 5,324,623, US 5,853,960 and US 5,871,888. It is common to all the aforementioned methods that dictated by principle a certain thickness is necessary and the light which passes through the microlens must pass not only through the lens, but the carrier substrate. Due to the simultaneously required high quality and demands for higher resolution with simultaneously higher brilliance which depends among others on the thickness and the number of optics along the optical axis, therefore the beam path, further optimization of the microlenses is desirable.

The fidelity of shape of a microlens is especially important. This is defined as the microlens having to be the exact negative of the die. Very often the fidelity of shape of a microlens during

the curing process of the microlens is not maintained since the microlens shrinks and therefore a differential volume arises between the die and the microlens.

Another important property of a good microlens is the optical axis. The elimination of a wedge fault of the die relative to the carrier is especially important for a correct optical axis of the microlens, since in the presence of the wedge fault during embossing the optical axis cannot be embossed exactly perpendicular to the carrier.

The object of this invention is to devise a device and a method with which microlenses can be produced especially in mass production and have high production precision, especially a very high fidelity to shape and an exactly aligned optical axis.

This object is achieved with the features of Claims 1 and 8. Advantageous developments of the invention are given in the dependent claims. All combinations of at least two of the features given in the specification, the claims and/or the figures also fall within the scope of the invention. At the given value ranges, values within the indicated limits will also be considered to be disclosed as boundary values and will be claimed in any combination.

The idea underlying the invention is to emboss and cure at the same time the plurality of microlenses (microlens field) produced in one method pass, but to cure the individual microlenses spatially separate from one another. In this way any faults produced by the embossing and curing are limited to the respective microlens so that the faults are not cumulative. This furthermore has the positive consequence that the separation step for separation of the microlenses from one another can be omitted. The separation takes place more or less as dictated by the system, especially by separate application or by spatial separation by means of the die.

The separation of the microlenses from one another is also the prerequisite for the active,

force-regulated die control as claimed in the invention which at first ensures the fidelity of shape of all microlenses. If the microlenses were not separated from another, when the microlenses cure and in the course of the shrinkage process which begins with this the material would contract over the entire length of the wafer and thus would produce shrinkage of varying intensity depending on the position, which shrinkage could not be compensated at least over the entire wafer.

The contour accuracy can be obtained as claimed in the invention if it is ensured that the die during the curing process actively, therefore in a controlled manner, continues the embossing process until it is ensured that a change in the shape of the microlens no longer occurs since the curing process has been completely terminated.

The following method steps are provided as claimed in the invention, especially in the following sequence:

- application of the lens material which is intended for the embossing of the microlenses, especially a curable fluid, preferably polymer, in fluid form, to a plurality of first lens molds distributed on a first embossing side of a first die for embossing of the microlenses,
- moving the first die and a second die located essentially parallel, specifically in an X-Y plane, and opposite the first die, on top of one another in a Z direction which runs essentially perpendicular to the X-Y plane,
- recording an averaged force value from at least three actuators which control one of the two dicees, at the start of the embossing process after complete filling of the die molds by the embossing material,
- curing the lens material and simultaneous re-adjustment of the distance of the two dicees to one another by further movement on top of one another so that the force value which has

been determined at the start of curing remains the same or becomes at least greater during the curing process in order to ensure that any shrinkage of the lens material is compensated by movement of the dies on top of one another for all cases.

The device as claimed in the invention has in particular the following features:

- a first die with first lens molds distributed on one embossing side of the first die,
- a first receiving apparatus for accommodating the first die on one receiving side which faces away from the embossing side,
- a second receiving apparatus for accommodating a second die on its receiving side which faces away from its embossing side,
- application means for application of the lens material which is intended for embossing of the microlenses, especially a curable fluid, preferably polymer, in fluid form to the first lens molds,
- embossing means for embossing of the microlenses by shaping and curing the lens material, the shaping taking place by movement of the first die and of the second die on top of one another, especially to a thickness D_1 of the lens material in the Z-direction, especially by means for position control of the first and second die relative to one another, there being measurement means for measuring an embossing force during embossing, by means of which the embossing, especially at least during the curing, can be influenced, especially by force control, preferably in addition to the position control.

In the entire document a die is defined as an element which comes into contact with the fluid which is to be cured and shapes it accordingly. In particular therefore also a simple planar wafer of Si, glass or another other material, even if it is not structured, can be regarded as a die.

The invention is characterized both according to the device and also the method especially in that the lens material of each microlens at least during curing is separate from the lens material of each microlens which is adjacent in the X-Y plane. The X-Y plane is especially defined by the first embossing side, one X-direction of the X-Y plane being perpendicular to one Y direction of the X-Y plane.

The control of the features described as claimed in the invention takes place especially by a control apparatus which is assigned to the device, preferably which is integrated into it. The apparatus acquires signals from sensors or detection means which are provided according to the device and delivers corresponding control or adjustment signals to the elements of the device which carry out the method as claimed in the invention.

The integrated control apparatus preferably consists of position controllers which can move at least one of the two dies so that movement of the two dies on top of one another, therefore a relative movement, is enabled. Furthermore there are at least three force transducers which have been installed in the device such that the determination of the surface pressure and thus the surface force on the X-Y plane between the two dies is enabled.

The force is controlled especially such that at least during the curing a force control, especially in addition to the position control, takes place, the embossing force being made to compensate for a shrinkage of the lens material during curing. This is preferably effected by force control such that the embossing force remains the same during curing or increases according to an especially position-dependent and/or time-dependent control.

The shape of the microlenses is determined on the one hand by the first lens molds and on the other hand by the second die which as claimed in the invention can have especially second lens

molds. The first lens molds are especially convexly or concavely curved, while the second die has in particular a planar embossing surface. The lens molds or dies thus form the negatives of the microlenses.

The lens material of the microlenses is arranged separately as claimed in the invention for each microlens especially from the application to the curing, preferably during the entire method as claimed in the invention. In other words, the lens material of the microlenses has in particular no direct connection among one another as claimed in the invention.

According to one advantageous embodiment of the invention, it is provided both according to the device and also according to the method that during curing, force-controlled and position-controlled approach of the two dies toward one another takes place so that possible shrinkages of the microlenses are compensated by recompressed material.

Alternatively or jointly with the preceding embodiment, one preferred approach consists in that during the curing and/or during the embossing an X-Y alignment of the first embossing side relative to the second embossing side takes place in the X-Y plane. For this purpose the device has in particular a receiving apparatus with a calibration table which is made to execute a translational and especially in addition a rotational movement of the dies toward one another.

Alternatively or jointly with the preceding embodiments, one preferred approach consists in that prior to curing and/or prior to embossing a wedge fault compensation by wedge fault compensation means for parallel alignment of the embossing sides takes place. The wedge fault compensation means cause an exact and reproducible, exactly vertical position of the optical axis of each microlens of the plurality of microlenses.

In particular, the wedge fault compensation or the X-Y alignment or the Z-correction can

take place especially continually after falling short of certain value of a distance between the first embossing side and the second embossing side of the die. This is because it is especially advantageous as claimed in the invention to carry out the alignment, correction and/or wedge fault compensation shortly before the embossing or curing of the lens wafer and during the curing since at this instant a minimum possible distance between the two opposite embossing sides is present so that especially with a position detection apparatus which is rigid to the embossing sides an extremely accurate detection of the position of the embossing sides and thus of the position of the wafer and the die is enabled. By detecting the position of the dies and the respective embossing sides to one another exact control of the wedge fault compensation means and of the X-Y alignment means is possible. Accordingly it is especially advantageous if the shaping takes place position-controlled and/or force-controlled according to one advantageous embodiment of the invention. As claimed in the invention, position detection by means of capacitive and/or inductive distance meters and/or optical devices such as interferometers could take place.

To the extent the dies have corresponding alignment marks for wedge fault compensation and/or for X-Y alignment, especially on their embossing side, preferably at least on one peripheral edge of the dies, a still more exact detection of the position of the embossing sides can be implemented and by the arrangement of the alignment marks on the embossing sides, especially integrated flush into the embossing sides, the distance between the alignment marks is as small as possible. In this way the accuracy of position detection by detection means as claimed in the invention, especially in the form of optics, preferably microscopes, is substantially increased.

It is especially advantageous here if the lens material is transparent to electromagnetic rays, especially to light, so that during the alignment the position detection takes place through the lens

material, there being markings under the lenses. Hereinafter this is called in-liquid alignment and this measure yields a range of the depth of focus of position detection means provided as claimed in the invention, especially optics for detecting the position of the alignment marks and of the embossing sides of the dies, which range is enlarged especially by the index of refraction of the fluid as a multiplier.

As a consequence, it is especially advantageous if there are optical position detection means, especially optics, for wedge fault compensation and/or for X-Y alignment and/or for Z-correction, during the wedge fault compensation and/or the X-Y alignment and/or Z-correction both the embossing side of the first die or its alignment marks and also the embossing side of the second die or its alignment marks being located especially at the same time in the range of the depth of focus of the optical position detection means which are rigid especially to the die. As claimed in the invention it is therefore no longer necessary to shift the position detection means during the position detection or during the alignment and shaping so that the position detection means themselves have no effect on the relative position of the first die to the second die and thus an additional fault source is precluded. In the prior art the problem arose that either a rigid position detection means with a larger range of the depth of focus or a movable position detection means with a smaller range of the depth of focus had to be used. This dilemma is resolved by this measure as claimed in the invention.

By the distance between the embossing side (or the alignment marks) of the first die and the embossing side (or the alignment marks) of the second die in the Z-direction being greater than 0 and at the same time smaller than the range of the depth of focus in the Z-direction during position detection, the detection accuracy is improved and increased.

According to another configuration of the invention, it is advantageously provided according to the device and/or method that the application of the lens material takes place by application of droplets. For this purpose according to the device there are droplet application means, especially a droplet dispenser. With these droplet application means exact metering of the respective amount of the lens material for each microlens can be controlled. The control takes place especially via the control apparatus.

The separation of the lens material of each microlens of the microlens field takes place according to another advantageous embodiment of the invention by free spaces which at least partially, especially completely surround the first lens molds being provided for separation of the lens material of adjacent microlenses during curing. Thus the lens material of the microlenses is separated at least predominantly, preferably completely from one another in space.

To the extent as claimed in the invention a shrinkage of the microlenses during curing is compensated especially by the wedge fault compensation means and/or the X-Y alignment means and/or by Z-correction and/or the position detection means, the accuracy of the microlenses is again distinctly increased.

As an independent invention there is moreover a microlens field which is produced by the device as claimed in the invention and/or the method as claimed in the invention and which consists of the following features:

- a second die which is made especially as a flat substrate, preferably a wafer, with a plurality of microlenses which have been cured and embossed from the second die and which are located separate from one another on the second die.

In particular the second die, especially on the embossing side, preferably at least on one

peripheral edge of the second die, has alignment marks for wedge fault compensation and/or for X-Y alignment and/or for Z-correction.

Preferably the adhesion between one of the two dies and the embossing material is greater than to the other die. This ensures that in removal of the lenses from the mold by removing one of the dies, the microlenses remain adhering only on one die. Preferably the die on which the microlenses remain is the lower die.

The further processing of the lenses after shaping can take place in different ways.

One conceivable and preferred possibility is the use of a temporary carrier as the lower die on which the lenses are transported in order to be removed in a later process.

For example a flip-chip bonder could be used in order to accommodate the lenses and to place them on another wafer. The lenses could be stacked accordingly, provided with apertures, etc.

Another possibility consists in using a transparent wafer as the lower die on which the microlenses remain permanently. In another step, cutting of the individual component regions can take place in order to obtain several individual microlenses with a corresponding "backbone" base.

Features disclosed according to the method should also be considered as disclosed according to the device and vice versa.

Other advantages, features and details of the invention will become apparent from the following description of preferred exemplary embodiments and using the drawings.

Figure 1a shows a schematic, cut side view of a device as claimed in the invention in a first inventive method step of application of a lens material for producing inventive microlenses of a microlens field as claimed in the invention,

Figure 1b shows a schematic of a method step of X-Y alignment as claimed in the invention

by means of the position detection means as claimed in the invention,

Figure 1c shows a schematic of a method step of embossing as claimed in the invention by embossing means,

Figure 1d shows a schematic of a method step of curing as claimed in the invention by curing means and

Figure 1e shows a schematic of a microlens field which has been embossed and cured as claimed in the invention.

In the figures advantages and features of the invention are labeled with the reference numbers which identify them according to embodiments of the invention, components or features with the same function or function with the same effect being labeled with identical reference numbers.

Figures 1a to 1e show a method sequence as claimed in the invention according to one embodiment of the invention for producing a plurality of microlenses 10 (see Figure 1e) from a lens material, specifically a curable fluid 2, in this case a polymer.

Figure 1a shows a first die 3 which is accommodated in a first receiving apparatus which is not shown for accommodating the first die 3 on one receiving side 3a facing away from the embossing side 3o. The movement of the receiving apparatus and thus also of the first die 3 is controlled by a control apparatus which is not shown.

The receiving side 3a in the first method step of application of the curable fluid 2 which is intended for embossing the microlenses 10, which method step is shown in Figure 1a, is arranged pointing upward so that the application of the curable fluid 2 can take place by means of a droplet dispenser 1 by the weight of the curable fluid 2.

The application takes place in the fluid, uncured form to a plurality of first lens molds 5 which are distributed on the first embossing side 3o. Embossing surfaces 5o of the first lens molds 5 in the illustrated exemplary embodiment are shaped concavely as negatives for the microlenses 10 which are to be produced. The curable fluid 2 is applied separately for each microlens 10 to be produced to the respective first lens mold 5 by means of a droplet dispenser 1. The latter is controlled by the control apparatus and applies an exactly defined amount of the curable fluid 2 to each of the first lens molds 5.

In the subsequent method step which is shown in Figure 1b, the first die 3 is turned by 180 degrees (flip) so that the receiving side 3a points up. This can take place for example by means of a robot arm which is used in particular also as a receiving apparatus. It is also conceivable as claimed in the invention that the die 3 is not turned and the die 4 approaches from the top.

The first die 3 is located opposite a second embossing side 4o of a second die 4, which side points up, and is aligned by means of corresponding first alignment marks 6, 6' of the first die 3 and second alignment marks 7, 7' of the second die 4.

The alignment marks 6, 6', 7, 7' are preferably located on one peripheral edge 3u, 4u of the first and second die 3, 4, preferably outside of a region covered by the lens molds 5.

For this purpose there are detection means in the form of two microscopes 8, 9 and alignment means for alignment of the first die 3 relative to the second die 4. The alignment means are able to align the first die 3 and/or the second die 4 in one X-direction, one Y-direction and one rotation direction and their angular position to the horizontal plane (X-Y plane). The alignment of the angular position takes place by wedge fault compensation means which provide for a preferably ideally parallel alignment of the embossing sides 3o, 4o. The control

of the wedge fault compensation means and of the X-Y alignment means takes place by the control apparatus which acquires from the detection means and optionally other sensor values about the relative and/or absolute position of the first die 3 and of the second die 4.

The second die 4 is accommodated by a receiving apparatus which is not shown. The first and the second receiving apparatus can be made especially as chucks with suction paths which fix the first and/or the second die 3 or 4. The first and/or second die 3, 4 can be made especially as wafers, the second die 4 in the illustrated exemplary embodiment having a planar embossing side 4o. As claimed in the invention, the second embossing side 4o can also have second lens molds which are located at corresponding positions to the first lens molds 5 of the first die 3.

Then movement of the first die 3 and the second die 4 towards one another takes place in one Z-direction. During the movement towards one another especially continuously another X-Y alignment and/or wedge fault compensation takes place.

The movement towards one another takes place up to a thickness D_1 of the curable fluid 2, the detection of the thickness taking place preferably by measuring a distance d_A between corresponding first and second alignment marks 6, 7 or 6', 7' or at other suitable sites on which the surfaces 4o, 3o of the diees are flat (see Figure 1c).

In the method step which is shown in Figure 1d the curable fluid 2 is cured by curing means (here in the form of UV rays) which pass through the first die 3 and/or the second die 4. During curing, as claimed in the invention the force and the position re-adjustment of the two diees to one another are measured so that the force remains the same or at least increases.

The curing can take place by any type of electromagnetic radiation, especially by UV light.

A thermal curing or another other type of curing would also be conceivable. The type of curing depends mostly on the material used and is known to anyone skilled in the art in the field.

In addition to the X-Y alignment and the wedge fault compensation at least shrinkage of the curable fluid 2 in the Z-direction, especially in addition shrinkage in the X- and Y- direction, is taken into account and a thickness D_2 of the microlenses 10 is set so that the microlenses 10 have perfect optical properties and no dents or faults produced by shrinkage are produced.

The thickness D_1 and D_2 corresponds especially to the maximum thickness of the lenses in the Z-direction.

As soon as curing is completed, the first die 3 is detached from the second die 4 and as claimed in the invention microlenses 10 which have been separated from one another remain on the second die 4. A mechanical separation after curing can be omitted as claimed in the invention.

The separation takes place especially by a distance A between the embossing surfaces 50 which is dimensioned such that after embossing and curing of the curable fluid 2 in the step shown in Figure 1e there is a distance B between the embossed and cured microlenses 10.

Thus, during the entire method sequence on the periphery of each microlens 10 and the curable fluid 2 provided for the microlenses 10 there is a free space 11 in which the curable fluid 2 can spread or shrink within certain limits. In this way the region of the microlenses 10 which is decisive for the optics is not adversely affected by corresponding forming so that the microlens 10 after curing the curable fluid 2 at least in the middle region of the microlenses 10 which is decisive for the optics has an optimum shape with an optical axis of each microlens 10, which axis is aligned perfectly in the Z-direction.

Reference number list

1	droplet dispenser
2	curable fluid
3	first die
3a	receiving side
3o	first embossing side
3u	peripheral edge
4	second die
4a	receiving side
4o	second embossing side
4u	peripheral edge
5	first lens molds
5o	embossing surface
6, 6'	first alignment marks
7, 7'	second alignment marks
8	microscope
9	microscope
10	microlenses
11	free spaces
A	distance
B	distance
D ₁	(maximum) thickness

D_2	(maximum) thickness
X	X-direction
Y	Y-direction
Z	Z-direction

Claims

1. A method for producing a plurality of microlenses (10) from a lens material with the following steps, especially with the following sequence:

- application of the lens material which is intended for the embossing of the microlenses (10), especially a curable fluid (2), preferably polymer, in fluid form, to a plurality of first lens molds (5) distributed on a first embossing side (3o) of a first die (3) for embossing of the microlenses (10),
- turning the first die (3) by 180°, so that the receiving side (3a) points up,
- moving the first die (3) and a second die (4) located essentially parallel, specifically in an X-Y plane, and opposite the first die (3), towards one another in a Z-direction which runs essentially perpendicular to the X-Y plane, especially by position control,
- embossing the microlenses (10) by shaping and curing the lens material, the shaping taking place by moving the first and second embossing sides (3o, 4o) towards one another,

characterized in that the adhesion between one of the two dies (3, 4) and the lens material is greater than to the other die (3, 4).

2. The method as claimed in Claim 1, wherein the lens material of each microlens (10) at least during curing is separate from the lens material of each microlens (10) which is adjacent in the X-Y plane.

3. The method as claimed in Claim 1 or 2, wherein during the curing and/or during the embossing an X-Y alignment of the first embossing side (3o) relative to the second embossing side (4o) takes place in the X-Y plane.

4. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, wherein the first die (3) and the second die (4), especially on their embossing sides (3o, 4o), preferably at least on their peripheral edges (3u, 4u), have alignment marks (6, 6', 7, 7') corresponding to one another for wedge fault compensation and/or for X-Y alignment.

5. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, wherein the lens material is applied by application of droplets.

6. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, wherein there are free spaces (11)

which at least partially, especially completely surround the first lens molds (5) for separation of the lens material of adjacent microlenses (10) during curing.

7. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, wherein shrinkage of the microlenses (10) is compensated during curing.

8. A device for producing a plurality of microlenses (10) from a lens material with the following:

- a first die (3) with first lens molds (5) distributed on one embossing side (3o) of the first die (3),
- a first receiving apparatus for accommodating the first die (3) on one receiving side (3a) which faces away from the embossing side (3o), wherein the first die (3) can be turned by 180° by means of the first receiving apparatus, wherein the turning takes place by means of a robot arm,
- a second receiving apparatus for accommodating a second die (4) on its receiving side (4a) which faces away from its embossing side (4o),
- application means for application of the lens material which is intended for embossing of the microlenses (10), especially a curable fluid (3), preferably polymer, in fluid form to first lens molds (5),
- embossing means for embossing of the microlenses by shaping and curing the lens material, the shaping taking place by movement of the first die (3) and of the second die (4) towards one another in the Z-direction, especially by means for position control of the first (3) and second die (4) relative to one another,

characterized in that the adhesion between one of the two dies (3, 4) and the lens material is greater than to the other die (3, 4).

9. The device as claimed in Claim 8 which is made such that the lens material of each microlens (10) can be applied by application means such that at least during curing it is separate from the lens material of each microlens (10) which is adjacent in the X-Y plane.

10. The device as claimed in Claim 8 or 9 which is made such that by X-Y alignment of the device during curing and/or during embossing an X-Y alignment of the first embossing side (3o) relative to the second embossing side (4o) can be carried out in one X-Y plane.

11. The device as claimed in at least one of Claims 8 to 10 which is made such that for wedge fault compensation and/or for X-Y alignment in the first die (3), especially on the first embossing side

(3o), preferably at least on one peripheral edge (3u) of the first die (3), there are first alignment marks (6, 6') which are arranged corresponding to the second alignment marks (7, 7') of the second die (4).

12. The device as claimed in at least one of Claims 8 to 11, wherein the application means are made as droplet application means, in particular a droplet dispenser (1).

13. The device as claimed in at least one of Claims 8 to 12, wherein the device has free spaces (11) which at least partially, especially completely surround the first lens molds (5) for separation of the lens material of adjacent microlenses (10) during curing.

14. The device as claimed in at least one of Claims 8 to 13, wherein the device has compensation means for compensation of a shrinkage of the microlenses (10) during curing.