

Machine for the working of tubes provided with an optical sensor for measuring the forward displacement of the tube being worked and/or the rotational displacement of the same about the longitudinal axis thereof

5 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to a machine for the working, for example the bending, of tubes, bars, profiled sections and similar elongated blanks.

10 In the following description, reference will be made for convenience to the working of tubes, it being understood that the invention is applicable to the working of any other elongated blank, irrespective of whether it is a bar, a profiled section, etc.

Moreover, even if the following description is provided with particular reference to a
15 machine arranged to work (specifically to bend) a tube wound in a coil, the invention is not to be intended as being limited to machines arranged to work on tubes or other elongated blanks wound in a coil, but is also applicable to machines operating on straight tube sections.

20 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Machines are known which, starting from a tube wound in a coil, straighten, bend and then cut the tube to size. An example of such a machine is the tube bending machine produced and marketed by the Applicant under the name 4-RUNNER. This machine is illustrated in
25 Figures 1 to 3 of the attached drawings, where Figure 1 shows the machine as a whole, Figure 2 shows the machine without reel, while Figure 3 shows in detail the straightening unit and the feeding unit of the machine.

The tube to be worked (indicated at T) is loaded at the back of the machine (which is
30 generally indicated at 100) in the form of a coil C on a reel 10 and during operation is gradually unwound from the coil C by means of a suitable rotational movement of the reel 10. Once unwound from the coil C, the tube T is straightened by a straightening unit 12

and fed along its longitudinal axis (indicated at x) by a feeding unit 14. In the machine illustrated in Figures 1 to 3, the feeding unit 14 is located downstream of the straightening unit 12, but the arrangement of the two units may also be reversed.

5 The straightening unit 12 comprises a first set of idler rollers 16, which act on opposite sides of the tube T in a first straightening plane perpendicular to the axis of the coil C, and a second set of idler rollers 18, which act on opposite sides of the tube T in a second straightening plane perpendicular to the first straightening plane. The function of the two sets of idler rollers 16 and 18 of the straightening unit 12 is to plastically deform the
10 material of the tube T in more than one direction in order to finally obtain a straightened tube.

The feeding unit 14 comprises two or more pairs of motorized rollers 20, which are arranged on opposite sides of the tube T and, by rotating, transmit motion to the tube T by
15 friction, causing the tube T to move forward along its longitudinal axis x.

The tube T thus straightened reaches the front area of the machine, where a bending head 22 carrying special bending tools bends the tube according to a geometry defined in advance by the user. The bending head 22 has sufficient degrees of freedom to rotate
20 completely about the longitudinal axis x of the tube T and is thus capable of bending the tube T in different planes.

The tube straightening and feeding operations often cause errors in the positioning of the tube downstream of the straightening and feeding units. In fact, the cross section of the tube wound into a coil is often uneven and not circular. The drawing of the tube by means
25 of rollers may produce non-homogeneous pressures on the material of the tube and consequent rotational displacements of the tube about its longitudinal axis, due to an incorrect adjustment of the pressures exerted by the rollers on the tube or due to imperfections in the geometric shape of the surfaces of the rollers. Such positioning errors
30 inevitably affect the subsequent tube bending phase.

In order to ensure that the tube bending phase is carried out in accordance with the desired

geometry, it is necessary that the forward displacement of the tube along its longitudinal axis is correctly measured and that any rotational displacements of the tube about its longitudinal axis are avoided or, alternatively, measured and appropriately compensated.

- 5 Typically, the forward displacement of the tube along its longitudinal axis is measured using a contact measurement device comprising a measuring wheel that, rolling on the tube, transmits the longitudinal movement of the tube to an optical encoder. In order to ensure continuous contact of the measuring wheel with the material of the tube, which is essential for the correct operation of the measurement device, the measuring wheel
10 typically has a knurled contact surface so as to avoid slippage between the wheel and the tube even in the case of high speeds and accelerations of the tube. However, this often produces undesired marks on the surface of the tube. To overcome this inconvenience, the measuring wheel (or, at least, the radially outermost part of the wheel, which is intended to come into contact with the tube) may be made of a material with a higher friction
15 coefficient (for example rubber). This, however, leads to a higher deformability of the measuring wheel, resulting in a reduction in measurement accuracy.

- To prevent the rotational displacement of the tube about its longitudinal axis, the known machines are typically equipped with an anti-rotation device, indicated at 24 in Figures 1
20 to 3. The anti-rotation device 24 basically comprises a carriage 26, which is movable along the longitudinal axis x of the tube T , and two pneumatically-operated grippers 28 and 30, which are integral to the carriage 26 and to the machine structure, respectively. The carriage 26 is free to slide on a guide with recirculating-ball shoes, and its positioning in the rest condition is controlled at high speed by means of a pneumatic cylinder 32. Each of
25 the two grippers 28 and 30 is equipped with two blocks having a groove with round cross-section with a nominal radius equal to the radius of the tube T to be worked. The tube T is always fed while the gripper 28 (i.e. the movable gripper, integral to the carriage 26) is kept closed, so as to avoid rotational displacement of the tube about its axis. In the return strokes of the gripper 28, the tube T is held in position by the other gripper 30 (i.e. the
30 fixed gripper, integral to the machine structure).

Such an anti-rotation device, besides being cumbersome, also lead to an increase in the

overall cycle time of the machine.

The need to measure the forward displacement of the tube along its longitudinal axis and/or the rotational displacement of the tube about its longitudinal axis also exists in the case of tube working machines, in particular tube bending machines, operating on straight tube sections, not only on machines operating on tubes wound in coil.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a tube working machine (or more generally, as mentioned in the introductory part of the description, a machine for working elongated blanks), which is able to measure the forward displacement of the tube being worked along its longitudinal axis and/or the rotational displacement of the tube being worked about its longitudinal axis in a precise, fast and reliable manner, without damaging the surface of the material of the tube or increasing the cycle time of the machine.

This and other objects are fully achieved according to the present invention by a tube working machine having the features defined in the accompanying independent claim 1.

Advantageous embodiments of the invention are specified in the dependent claims, the subject-matter of which is to be understood as forming an integral part of the following description.

In summary, the invention is based on the idea of equipping the machine with an optical sensor arranged to optically measure, while the tube is being worked, the forward displacement of the tube along its longitudinal axis and/or the rotational displacement of the tube about its longitudinal axis, wherein the optical sensor comprises a light source (LED or laser) for illuminating a surface portion of the tube being worked, a camera for acquiring images of said surface portion of the tube, and a digital processing unit to determine at each time instant, based on the comparison of the image of said surface portion of the tube acquired by the camera in that time instant with the image acquired at the preceding time instant, the forward displacement of the tube along its longitudinal axis

and/or the rotational displacement of the tube about its longitudinal axis. By virtue of the use of such an optical sensor to measure the forward and/or rotational displacement of the tube being worked, it is no longer necessary to use a measuring wheel, as in the prior art, and therefore the aforementioned inconveniences related to the contact between the measuring wheel and the material of the tube are avoided.

Moreover, due to the fact that the optical sensor also allows precise measurement not only of the forward displacement, but also of the rotational displacement, of the tube being worked, it is no longer necessary to provide an anti-rotation system for preventing rotation of the tube, as it is the case with the prior art, but rather it is sufficient, knowing the rotational displacement of the tube upstream of the working head, to compensate for this rotational displacement by appropriate movement of the working head. The cycle time of the machine is thus not increased.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Further features and advantages of the present invention will become more apparent from the following detailed description, given purely by way of non-limiting example with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 shows a tube working machine according to the prior art;

Figure 2 shows the machine of Figure 1, without reel;

Figure 3 shows in detail the straightening unit, the feeding unit and the anti-rotation device of the machine of Figure 1;

Figure 4 shows a tube working machine according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 5 shows the sensor of the machine of Figure 4, along with its positioning mechanism for positioning the optical sensor near the tube being worked; and

Figure 6 shows schematically the structure of the optical sensor of Figure 5.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

With reference to Figure 4, where parts and elements identical or corresponding to those of

Figures 1 to 3 are indicated with the same reference numbers, a tube working machine according to an embodiment of the present invention is generally indicated 100.

5 The machine described below with reference to Figure 4 is a tube bending machine, i.e. a machine configured to carry out tube bending operations, but the invention is not limited to this type of machine, being applicable to machines arranged to perform any other type of working operations on tubes (or on other elongated blanks). Moreover, although the machine described and illustrated herein is designed to process tubes wound in coils, the invention is not limited to this type of machine but is also applicable to machines designed
10 to process straight tube sections.

As in the prior art described above with reference to Figures 1 to 3, the machine 100 basically comprises:

- a reel 10, on which a coil C of the tube T to be worked (in this case, to be bent) is
15 placed;
- a straightening unit 12 arranged to straighten the tube T as it is unwound from the coil C, the straightening unit 12 comprising, for example, a first set of idler rollers 16, which act on opposite sides of the tube T in a first straightening plane perpendicular to the axis of the coil C, and a second set of idler rollers 18, which act on opposite sides of the
20 tube T in a second straightening plane perpendicular to the first straightening plane;
- a feeding unit 14 arranged to feed the tube T from the straightening unit 12 along its longitudinal axis x, the feeding unit 14 comprising for example two pairs of motorized rollers 20, which are arranged on opposite sides of the tube T and, by rotating, transmit motion to the tube T by friction;
- 25 - a working head 22 (in this case, a bending head) that carries appropriate working tools (in this case, bending tools, which are known per se and will therefore not be described in detail herein) and has appropriate degrees of freedom to allow working operations (in this case, bending operations, even in different planes, according to a geometry that may be defined in advance by the user) to be carried out on the tube T; and
30 - a programmable control unit (not shown) for managing the movements of the working head 22, as well as the feeding unit 14 and (where applicable, as in the present case) of the reel 10.

In case of a machine operating on straight tube sections, the straightening unit will obviously not be provided, while the feeding unit will be provided (which will, however, have a different configuration from the one illustrated herein).

- 5 The constructional and functional details of the reel 10, of the straightening unit 12, of the feeding unit 14, of the working head 22 and of the control unit are not relevant for the purposes of the present invention and thus will not be described and illustrated further herein.
- 10 According to the invention, the machine 100 further comprises, downstream of the feeding unit 14 (and where, as in the present case, a straightening unit is also provided for, downstream of the straightening unit), an optical sensor 34 for optically measuring the forward displacement of the tube T being worked along its longitudinal axis x and/or the rotational displacement of the tube T being worked about its longitudinal axis x.
- 15 With reference to figure 5, a positioning mechanism 36 is associated with the optical sensor 34 to keep the optical sensor 34 close to the tube T being worked, in particular in alignment with the longitudinal axis x of the tube T.
- 20 With reference to Figure 6, the optical sensor 34 comprises a light source 38 (for example, a laser or LED source) for illuminating a surface portion S of the tube T, a camera 40 for high-frequency acquisition of images of the surface portion S, and a digital processing unit 42 for determining at any time instant, based on the comparison between the image of the surface portion S acquired at that time instant by the camera 40 and the image acquired at
25 the previous time instant, the forward displacement of the tube T along the longitudinal axis x (hereinafter simply referred to, for brevity, as forward displacement) and/or the rotational displacement of the tube T about the longitudinal axis x (hereinafter simply referred to, for brevity, as rotational displacement).
- 30 The images acquired by the camera 40 are very small, for example fifteen pixels per side, but contain tiny details and imperfections of the surface portion S of the tube T in front of which the optical sensor 34 is placed. The images acquired by the camera 40 are processed

in pairs by the digital processing unit 42 and each pair of consecutive images is used to calculate the (forward and rotational) displacement of the tube T in the time interval between the two time instants at which these images have been acquired.

- 5 For example, the displacement between two consecutive images is determined by cross-correlation. Indicating with $I_A(i,j)$ the grey intensity (the images are, in fact, acquired in grey scale) of each pixel of coordinates i, j of the first image, with $I_B(i,j)$ the grey intensity of the same pixel of the second image, and with m and n the displacement (in pixels) of the second image with respect to the first one in two perpendicular directions, the correlation
10 function $\Phi(m,n)$ is equal to the total sum of the products of the intensities of each pixel of the two images, according to the following equation:

$$\Phi(m, n) = \sum_{i,j} I_A(i, j) I_B(i + m, j + n)$$

- 15 The correlation function Φ takes its maximum value when the two images are perfectly superimposed. To determine the displacement between two consecutive images, the displacement values m and n are calculated in the two directions that maximize the function. On the basis of these displacement values between consecutive pairs of images, the displacement of the surface portion S of the tube T facing the optical sensor 36 both
20 along the longitudinal axis x and in the direction perpendicular to the longitudinal axis x is determined instant by instant. The diameter of the tube T being known, the angular displacement (rotation) about the longitudinal axis x is derived from the displacement of the surface portion S in a direction perpendicular to the longitudinal axis x .

- 25 With reference now again to Figure 5, the components of the optical sensor 34 mentioned above, i.e. the light source 38, the camera 40 and the digital processing unit 42, are housed in a casing 44 with a transparent window 46 through which the light beam emitted by the light source 38 passes and through which the camera 40 acquires images of the surface portion S of the tube T.

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The casing 44 is kept close to the tube T, with the window 46 facing the tube T and aligned

with the longitudinal axis x of the same, by the aforementioned positioning mechanism 36. Figure 5 of the attached drawings shows an example of embodiment of the positioning mechanism 36, it being understood that this embodiment is not binding for the purposes of the present invention and that other embodiments of this mechanism are also possible, in
 5 so far as they ensure the positioning of the casing 44 of the optical sensor 34 close to the tube T and in alignment with the longitudinal axis x of the latter.

According to the embodiment of Figure 5, the positioning mechanism 36 comprises first of all a support body 48 on which the casing 44 of the optical sensor 34 is mounted. The
 10 support body 48 has a pair of rollers 50 which are mounted freely rotatable and are arranged on longitudinally opposite sides of the casing 44, but on the same side of the tube T. The rollers 50 protrude towards the tube T from a front face 44a of the casing 44 where the window 46 is provided, in such a manner that during operation, with the rollers 50 kept in contact with the tube T while the latter moves forward along its longitudinal axis x , the
 15 front face 44a of the casing 44 is positioned parallel to the longitudinal axis x of the tube T and at a given fixed distance from the surface of the tube T. The positioning mechanism 36 further comprises a counter roller 52, which is arranged on the opposite side of the tube T with respect to the rollers 50 and is mounted on a slide 54 so as to be freely rotatable. The
 20 slide 54 is slidably mounted, for example along a pair of guide rods 56, in a direction perpendicular to the front face 44a of the casing 44 of the optical sensor 34. The positioning mechanism 36 further comprises an air spring 58 operatively interposed between the support body 48 and the slide 54 to urge the counter roller 52 towards the rollers 50 and thus ensure contact of the rollers 50 with the tube T.

25 Thanks to the presence of the optical sensor 34, the control unit of the machine receives, in real time, precise information on the forward displacement of the tube T along its longitudinal axis x , on the basis of which it controls the work process. Moreover, thanks to the fact of receiving, in real time, precise data on the rotational displacements, if any, of the tube T upstream of the working head 22 about its longitudinal axis x , the control unit of
 30 the machine is able to compensate, if necessary, for this rotational displacement by appropriately controlling the movements of the working head 22, without therefore the need to use a complex and expensive anti-rotation mechanism to prevent rotational

displacement of the tube T being worked about its longitudinal axis x and without increasing the cycle time of the machine.

5 Depending on the specific application, it is of course possible to measure only one of the two components of the movement of the tube, i.e. only the forward displacement or only the rotational displacement, the structure of the optical sensor remaining unchanged.

10 Naturally, the principle of the invention remaining unchanged, the embodiments and the constructional details may vary widely with respect to those described and illustrated herein purely by way of non-limiting example, without thereby departing from the scope of the invention as defined in the accompanying claims.

CLAIMS

1. Machine for the working of tubes (T) and similar elongated blanks, such as for example bars and profiled sections, comprising a working head (22) carrying working tools
5 suitable for carrying out one or more working operations on the tube (T), a tube feeding unit (14) for feeding the tube (T) along its longitudinal axis (x) towards the working head (22), and a programmable control unit arranged to control the tube feeding unit (14) and the working head (22),

characterized in that it further comprises, downstream of the tube feeding unit (14), an
10 optical sensor (34) arranged to optically measure, while the tube (T) is being worked, the forward displacement of the tube (T) along its longitudinal axis (x) and/or the rotational displacement of the tube (T) about its longitudinal axis (x), wherein the optical sensor (34) comprises a light source (38) for illuminating a surface portion (S) of the tube (T), a camera (40) for acquiring images of said surface portion (S) of the tube (T), and a digital
15 processing unit (42) for determining at each time instant, based on the comparison of the image of said surface portion (S) of the tube (T) acquired by the camera (40) in that time instant with an image acquired at a preceding time instant, the forward displacement of the tube (T) along its longitudinal axis (x) and/or the rotational displacement of the tube (T) about its longitudinal axis (x).

20 2. Machine according to claim 1, wherein the control unit is connected to the optical sensor (34) to receive from the optical sensor (34) data relating to the forward displacement of the tube (T) along its longitudinal axis (x) and/or to the rotational displacement of the tube (T) about its longitudinal axis (x) and to control, during working,
25 the tube feeding unit (14) and the working head (22) based on these data.

3. Machine according to claim 1 or claim 2, further comprising a positioning mechanism (36) for keeping the optical sensor (34) close to the tube (T) that is being worked and aligned with the longitudinal axis (x) of said tube (T).

30 4. Machine according to claim 3, wherein the optical sensor (34) comprises a casing (44) wherein the light source (38), the camera (40) and the digital processing unit (42) are

accommodated, said casing (44) having a front face (44a), operatively facing the tube (T) that is being worked, in which front face (44a) there is provided a transparent window (46) through which the light beam emitted by the light source (38) passes and through which the camera (40) acquires images of said surface portion (S) of the tube (T), and wherein the positioning mechanism (36) is configured to keep said front face (44a) of the casing (44) at a given fixed distance from the surface of the tube (T) that is being worked and parallel to the longitudinal axis (x) of the tube (T).

5. Machine according to claim 4, wherein the positioning mechanism (36) comprises a first body (48) on which the casing (44) of the optical sensor (34) is mounted, first roller means (50) carried by said first body (48), a second body (54) facing said first body (48) and movable relative to the latter in a direction perpendicular to said front face (44a) of the casing (44) of the optical sensor (34), second roller means (52) carried by said second body (54), and actuator means (58) operatively interposed between said first body (48) and second body (54) to urge said first body (48) and second body (54) towards each other along said perpendicular direction and to keep said first and second roller means (50, 52) in contact with the surface of the tube (T) on opposite sides of the longitudinal axis (x) of the tube (T).

6. Machine according to claim 5, wherein said actuator means (58) comprise an air spring.

7. Machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the working head (22) carries bending tools for carrying out bending operations on the tube (T).

8. Machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the machine (100) is arranged to work on tubes (T) that are wound in coil (C) and further comprises a reel (10) for unwinding the coil (C) of tube (T) to be worked and a straightening unit (12) for straightening the tube (T) while the tube (T) is being unwound from the coil (C), and wherein the optical sensor (34) is arranged downstream of the straightening unit (12).