The first selected reading for this essay was chosen from Chapter 13: ‘Metaphors, Idioms and Affordances’ of ‘Cooper, A., Reimann, R., & Cronin, D. (2007). About Face 3: The Essentials of Interaction Design (3rd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.’ The concept or idea that this paper is going to address is use of metaphors and idioms in different interface design, their pros and cons and devising a better way to overcome the limitations. Metaphors has become a buzzword in terms of interface design of technology (e.g., mobile apps) and day-to-day life (e.g., traffic signs). According to Lakoff and Johnson, “Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another”. In fact, in our everyday life the use of metaphor is very common (e.g., ‘life is a gamble’). It usually refers to a mapping of one domain to the meaning of a different domain. The usage of such metaphors in User Interface (UI) design is particularly useful for novice users who are interacting with it for the first time since it is intuitive to infer from them based on past experience. The second kind of interface design paradigm is implementation centric design. In order to use these kind of interfaces the user has be aware of the functionality of the program. One such example can be “org-chart centric” interfaces which requires users to have intimate knowledge of the structure of organization. The authors argued that while implementation-centric interfaces require users to have the domain knowledge to successfully interact, the metaphoric interfaces enable users to recognize the visual/verbal metaphors (e.g., a trash box essentially indicates it is a place to dump unnecessary files) from pure intuition. The third kind of paradigm is idiomatic interface design. This design solve the previous two paradigm, because it focuses on learning simple idioms instead of technical knowledge and intuitive learning. Most of the idioms are non-metaphoric and very easy to learn.

Although metaphors are advantageous in the first place, one has to acknowledge the pitfalls of them such as they don’t blend well with all kind of programs (scalability issue). For example, a metaphor that suits well in small process might fail when the process gets bigger. Also, metaphors are sometimes confined to cultural boundaries, i.e., the background of users and designers might not match which results into incompatible design. Besides, once the users become professionals from newbies it becomes untidy, hectic and tedious at times. The authors also pointed that finding good metaphors is cumbersome and sometimes programs rely heavily on metaphors (called global metaphors) which adds significant overhead to simple navigation.

The idea presented in the reading was particularly interesting to me because it turns out in modern UIs most of the elements are idiomatic. It is intriguing to see if we say ‘barking dog seldom bites’- it is easily understood even though there is no dog. Likewise, windows, title bars, hyperlinks, drop-downs, use of mouse etc. all are idiomatic learning by nature: there are no such thing in real world! The key notion is: all idioms must be learned, but they has to be learned only once because they are easy to remember. This leads us to design interfaces idiomatically rather than metaphorically. Because learning and remembering these idioms are easier for humans (for example learning to use mouse). That is why most GUI elements in modern technology prefer learning idiomatically without invoking any intuition. So using idioms in UI design can offer great help because there are more idioms to be invented, they are more adaptable and free of cultural bias and are consistent, learnable and efficient.