The second selected reading for this essay is chosen from Charles Hannon’s “As We May Speak: Metaphors, Conceptual Blends, and Usability” article. The author argued how metaphors and conceptual blend theory can govern the understanding of users when using a new technology or when exposed to a new interface. To illustrate how misuse of metaphor can be misleading and how conceptual blend theory can explain it, the author provided the example of Ted Stevens who once described the Internet as ‘series of tubes’. Tubes can be a perfect example for defining the Internet since it depicts connection between computers and its varying width can represent bandwidth. So it is using familiar concept to elucidate something new. But he misinterpreted by saying those tubes can be filled and clogged causing messages to delay. The conceptual blend theory explains why this was wrong. This theory holds that figurative languages draws from multiple sources to create a new, blended space. The blended space evokes ideas from each input source to create a new meaning. This theory helps us understand that when we use metaphor to map between domains, it will be helpful when users apply appropriate properties from different input spaces and they have the experience required by the employed reference frames. By this definition, it is easy to see that using tubes to define Internet creates a blend that correctly reflects the similarities of tubes input domain, however, it also applies inappropriate properties from input space (such as pipes can be filled, clogging etc.).

The idea of conceptual of blend is particularly interesting to me because blends are blends are intuitive in a sense that it resembles how human mind works. Since we have access to all other inputs that create the blend of aforementioned example, we know how Internet traffic is managed and therefore Internet as ‘series of tubes’ turns out to be funny. When we use metaphors to better understand new technology we need to pay particular attention to how these blends work and avoid metaphors that invokes blends that hinders usability. To better understand this theory, the author explained why notion of e-book did not gain popularity. The marketers simply failed to consider how metaphors will play out as blends in minds of users. Many properties of the traditional books are not supported by e-book devices. Some naïve properties such as page numbering can be difficult to maintain in a device where the font size can be varied. Instead of being primary properties of a digital book things like how to view pictures, how to bookmark etc. contain rigorous instructions which make them hectic. The blend becomes even more confusing when the book metaphor is used to describe products from Amazon Kindle and Sony Reader to web-based multimedia version of college textbooks.

Metaphors can reduce usability of a technology when it creates blends that carries wrong properties from input sources. One example could be transferring files between remote computers. Since the vertical spatial metaphor is used in general in such case, it is not unusual to get perplexed because nothing is moving up or down while transferring files between machines. The challenges of blend theory can be better understood by the new touch technology which has become a buzzword. When Steve Jobs said we can now ‘touch our music’ it did not make much sense to everyone. He tried to refer to the fact that iPod technologies are incorporated in new iPhones, however, the two input sources do not converge to create a blend which explains the technology better. The author summed it up by indicating the problems of metaphors in interface design i.e. they don’t scale well, they presume shared experience which might not be there etc. He suggested to focus rather on idiomatic design which does not these drawbacks. Since our minds are more welcoming to metaphors, comprehending the conceptual blend theory can enable us to better understand the metal model of users regarding how they interpret them.