Conceptual Spaces, The Unified Conceptual Space Theory, and Metaphor

My thesis uses Peter Gärdenfors' conceptual spaces theory of concepts as a framework for confronting some of the major outstanding issues in theories of concepts, most particularly the unending debates over whether concepts are best understood as mental representations or as non-representational abilities. I argue that we should jettison the "mental" qualifier on "mental representations" and take representations not as ontological realities but as a perspective we take -- one that, as agents capable of self-reflection, we cannot set aside, even while recognizing its logical limitations. I argue strongly as well that concepts and language pull apart, and that concepts must be considered on their own terms. I take similarity as an essential part of the story but one that, for the most part at least, should be treated as something to be explained and not itself an explanation.

I would like to focus in this talk on what Conceptual Spaces Theory (CST), and my proposed extensions to it (the Unified Conceptual Space Theory, or UCST), have to say about metaphor. First, both take metaphor to be primarily a semantic and not a linguistic issue: you have to get the concepts right to get the language right, much more than the other way around. Both are inclined to deny a substantive distinction between literal meaning and metaphor (or, probably, between metaphor and metonymy). In an important sense, all meaning is metaphor: both meaning making and metaphor involve, on a CST-based account, a mapping of disjoint and often contrasting conceptual spaces onto one another, ignoring dimensions that differ in favour of ones that match. Metaphorical meaning is *always* context sensitive, precisely because it involves this mapping of conceptual spaces onto one another and not a simple mapping of words or phrases. Just as there is no literal (as in uninterpreted) meaning, there is never just one metaphorical meaning. In place of a binary distinction between literal and metaphorical, one gets a continuum from implicitly to explicitly metaphorical, from nearly adjacent to widely separated conceptual spaces, and from primary to secondary and tertiary meanings.

If CST and UCST are right about context sensitivity, then any too narrowly symbolically focused approach to metaphor will flounder: symbols recognizably *are* symbols, after all, to the extent that they abstract away from context. On this point, CST is well positioned (and quite deliberately so) between associational and symbolic accounts, since the (mainly convex) geometric shapes it posits for concepts can, but need not, be treated as symbols. UCST assists by offering the mechanism whereby all of an agent's many different conceptual spaces, as discussed by Gärdenfors, map together into a single space of spaces.