The Hungarian scholar Zoltán Kövecses is one of the leading scholars in the area of cognitivist metaphor. He has written monographs on the metaphorical conceptualisations of emotions and was the first to make the cognitivist theory of metaphor widely accessible to students (Kövecses, 2002).

Lakoff and Johnson’s pioneering Metaphors We Live By (1980) strongly emphasized the idea that metaphorical thinking is rooted in the body. The authors demonstrated on the basis of numerous verbal metaphors that human beings consistently conceptualise and experience the abstract in terms of the concrete, the latter inherently linked to bodily motor functions and perception. A large number of conceptual metaphors, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and HAPPY IS UP have since been shown to manifest themselves in many other languages besides English. But over the past decade, cognitivist metaphor scholars have increasingly appreciated that a sound metaphor theory cannot be built on ‘embodiment’ alone: for that there is too much temporal and geographical variation in how humans conceptualise. The complement that is required is an awareness of the role of culture (e.g., Shore, 1996; Gibbs and Steen, 1999).

In his new book, Kövecses addresses the issue of the relation between universal and cultural aspects of metaphor. More specifically, he focuses on how the study of metaphor can be instrumental in comprehending culture. The pertinence of such work should be obvious in the following summary of the book’s subject: “To what extent do people around the world share their understandings of aspects of the world in which they live?” (p.2, emphasis in
original). Narrowing down his investigations, Kövecses announces he will consider how universality in metaphor relates to both cross-cultural and intra-cultural variation in metaphor. He concludes that while on an abstract level metaphors such as TIME IS SPACE and EMOTIONS ARE FORCES very probably structure thinking around the world—as manifestations in languages as disparate as English, Hungarian, and Japanese suggest—the specific instances of these generic metaphors are often far more culturally dependent. In order to pin down how divergences between cultures can arise, Kövecses discusses the following dimensions: (1) the range of metaphor: the source domains that a language or culture has at its disposal to conceptualise a particular target domain (e.g., the target domain LIFE can in English be conceived in terms of, among others, STRUGGLE, PRECIOUS POSSESSION, GAME, JOURNEY …); (2) a metaphor’s scope: the set of target domains with which a particular source domain can be coupled (e.g., the source domain BUILDING can structure the target domains THEORY, RELATIONSHIP, CAREER, COMPANY, LIFE …). Even if two languages have the same source domains available to conceptualise a given target domain, they may differ in the domain most used, an issue Kövecses captures under the heading ‘preferential conceptualization’ (p. 82).

In an illuminating passage, the author compares English and Hungarian metaphors with LIFE as the target, concluding that “where Americans talked about a precious possession in connection with life, Hungarians talked about war and struggle, and where Americans viewed life as a game, Hungarians viewed it as a compromise” (p. 85).

Kövecses discusses a number of dimensions on which metaphor usage may systematically differ from one community to another. It all boils down, of course, to the kinds of knowledge and experiences a community possesses: it is these that build up source domains that can subsequently be used to predicate something metaphorically about a target domain. An urban environment (with buildings, traffic, pollution etc.) favours other experiences than a rural environment (with nature, animals, agriculture etc.); an art-oriented community is more likely to deploy aesthetic source domains than a community of football fans. Gevaert’s (2001) study of metaphors of ANGER in mediaeval and Old English is quoted as a healthy reminder that even strongly embodied emotion metaphors such as ANGER IS HOT LIQUID IN A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER turn out to be more subject to cultural “fashions” than one might suspect. Gevaert finds that “the conceptualization of anger in terms of heat is not a constant feature of the concept of anger in English but that it can, and does, fluctuate in the
course of the development of English” (p. 105; see also Gevaert, 2005). Variation, moreover, may also be related to specific textual genres and, finally, be part of a speaker’s idiolect.

In the last part of the book, the author goes into more detail about how various parameters of metaphor can be affected by (sub)cultural variation. Given that MOTION is an important source domain (e.g., in TIME IS MOTION; LIFE IS A JOURNEY) Özcalsikan’s findings of differences between English and Turkish are revealing: “English primarily encodes manner into its verbs of motion (e.g., walk, run, march), whereas Turkish motion verbs in general lack this information concerning motion. Turkish primarily encodes direction into many of its motion verbs (e.g., verbs corresponding to English fall, come, spread, descend)” (p. 119; see Özcalsikan, 2003). Similarly, whereas POLITICS IS SPORTS is a cross-culturally occurring conceptual metaphor, the source domain is in the US more likely to be baseball or American football, while in China it is probably football, table tennis, or volleyball. At a higher level of conceptual organization (i.e., at the level involving opponents, winning/losing, cheating, etc.) the metaphor may well be close to universal, whereas at the lower levels (details derived from the rules of the sport in question), they lead to cross-culturally different conceptualisations.

Kövecses subsequently addresses the question, crucial in the context of the cognitivist paradigm, whether abstract concepts, such as TIME, LOVE, LIFE can be understood in a literal, non-metaphorical way at all. As a starting point he and his students investigated and compared occurrences pertaining to TIME in English and Hungarian sentences. Based on this sample, his provisional conclusion is that they cannot but be expressed metaphorically—a finding supported by Maalej’s (2004) analyses of Tunisian Arabic. Kövecses here provides researchers with a model to test this claim empirically, and to chart how conceptual metaphors, even if shared cross-culturally, have different elaborations in different languages. Such elaborations are anything but superficial. A systematic examination of verbal expressions manifesting LOVE/LIFE IS A JOURNEY in American English and Hungarian reveals interesting patterns:

In several examples the American English sentences foreground active agents and deliberate action of these agents, as opposed to the foregrounding of a passive relationship and relative passivity of the people participating in the love relationship in Hungarian. […] The difference may be suggestive of a more action-oriented versus a
more passivity-oriented attitude to love and to life in general. [...] Other sentences suggest that decisions about relationships are influenced by internal considerations of active agents in English, whereas they seem to be influenced by external conditions in Hungarian (p. 158).

Although the validity of such conclusions is inevitably limited by their dependence on a small sample of decontextualized sentences, these are exciting findings, capable and worthy of being further tested and refined in systematic, corpus-based research (cf. Charteris-Black, 2004).

The idea that cultural particularities can be detected by locating and analysing conceptual metaphors is pursued further in one of the most suggestive chapters of the book. Kövecses proposes how the study of a vague and general concept such as ‘American culture’ could be aided by a systematic and verifiable inventory and analysis of conceptual metaphors governing the American mind--for instance by charting the occurrences of \textsc{politics is sports} and \textsc{life is a show/spectacle} metaphors.

As appears to be de rigueur for cognitive linguists these days, Kövecses also discusses Fauconnier and Turner’s (2002) Blending Theory. Although not blind to its potential, I find the Blending Theory has hitherto not quite lived up to its promises (Forceville, 2004). For present purposes it is enough to reiterate that the Blending Theory’s alleged superiority over metaphor theory in its ability to model creativity and emergent meaning is overstated. The claim only seems valid if ‘metaphor theory’ is equated with cognitivist metaphor theory. Surely Black’s (1979) interaction theory of metaphor does the job of explaining metaphorical creativity very well (see Forceville, 1996: Chapter 2).

How is Kövecses’ book to be valued? This depends largely on what kind of readership one has in mind. For somebody who is familiar with the cognitivist metaphor paradigm generally, and with Kövecses’ own earlier work specifically, there is not that much news. A substantial part of the material in the book is repeated from earlier monographs (Kövecses, 1986, 2000, 2002), so that for the cognoscenti the fresh material (the notions of metaphor’s scope and range; the factors governing inter-group differences in metaphors; the metaphorical blueprint of American culture) gets somewhat buried in overly familiar ground. In addition, in his attempts to include really everything that might be of importance, Kövecses is sometimes a bit superficial, as in the chapter on non-verbal manifestations of metaphor. But then, the latter is the provenance in which I work myself (see Forceville, 2005...
for an application of Kövecses’ own work), so I am not entirely unbiased.

To a newcomer in the field or to someone who did not read much on the topic since Lakoff and Johnson (1980), by contrast, I imagine this must be a very stimulating and thought-provoking book. Kövecses convincingly demonstrates in what ways a healthy theory of metaphor needs to take into account the role of (sub)culture, and he thoroughly explains what elements in a metaphor can lead to cross- or subcultural variation. He rightly exploits the advantage of being able to compare Hungarian and American-English linguistically and culturally. Another good point is that the author is well-informed about pertinent work of scholars in various (non-Western) cultures, and generously and extensively discusses their findings. Moreover, he engages opponents in a good spirit, preferring to seek higher-level agreement to indulging in petty rivalry. And, finally, he is to be recommended for his, hopefully successful, attempts to promote metaphor research as of interest to sociologists and psychologists no less than to humanities scholars.

References