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"You Can Compare It to a Car, Because a Car Gives You That Kind of Freedom": Automotive Metaphors and Comparisons in the Narratives of Trainers and Guide Dog Handlers

Introduction

Mobility is one of the key ways of participating in the world—not only as a practice of moving through space, but also as an expression of intention, autonomy, agency, and identity (Kaufmann et al. 2004; Sheller 2011). In the context of blind and visually impaired individuals, mobility takes on particular significance. This is because it involves challenges arising, on the one hand, from their perceptual capabilities (the absence or significant limitation of vision), and, on the other hand, from the established system of organising transport—the related skills, movement, and spatial practices that largely rely on the capacity to see. Finding one's way and navigating within such an organised world requires learning alternative, non-visual strategies of action, including the use of a white cane, cooperation with a guide dog, support from acquaintances or professional assistants, and the use of navigation technologies (Anvik 2009; Deshen, Deshen 1989; Devlieger 2006).

In this article, I focus on the cooperation between visually impaired individuals and guide dogs, and more specifically, on how this cooperation is represented through automotive metaphors and comparisons. This is because, as emerged from my research on training and living with guide dogs, participants attempted

to convey the specificity of this cooperation not only through common associations such as "dog as the person's eyes" or "dog as an extension of the body," but also through general or specific references to owning or driving a car. The aim of this article is therefore to examine the meanings, values, and aspects of working with a dog that are expressed through this imagery, and what these reveals more broadly about the role of the guide dog in the context of independent mobility. At the same time, I seek to show how these images relate to broader forms of practical and symbolic organisation of the world—automobility, (dis)ability, (in)dependence, and (ab)normality that shape multiple aspects of life, including social and economic capital, status, identity, career, and family life.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Mobility and the Sense of Sight

Many scholars in the fields of anthropology and the sociology of the senses emphasise the multisensory nature of human experience, seeking thereby to move beyond an ocularcentric view of the world and recognising the value of other modes of sensory perception (Classen 1993; Classen et al. 1994; Howes 2003; Pallasmaa 2012). Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny the clear and, in many areas, dominant role of visual experiences in shaping human knowledge and practice, including the development and use of various technologies and tools, communication, interaction, and identity (Brennan 1996; Jenks 2002; Mirzoeff 2016). As William Mitchell (2005: 345) puts it: "It is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals".

Although patterns and norms related to visuality may vary across cultures, they are all rooted in the perceptual capacities of the human body—especially in visual cognition, which is the result of both species evolution and social education (Ingold 2011). As Mitchell (2005: 349) argues, rather than attributing an ocularcentric character to "modernity" or "the West" and comparing it to other cultures—as Marshall McLuhan (2011) did—it may be more useful to examine the various social practices of human visuality and their interrelations with other components of a given system of thought and action.

As Łukasz Zaremba (2016: 8) puts it, "visuality cannot be extracted from culture or the world—it permeates all their dimensions and constitutes one of their fundamental substances. Without it, the world would look entirely different" [author's translation]. Among the many key elements of human being-in-the-world, this principle also applies directly to the ways in which we orient and move through space, which—like in other sighted animals—are largely based on the ability to perceive visual stimuli.

This interrelation can be examined in various dimensions. Firstly, vision enables the recognition and localisation of objects at varying distances from

the subject, the efficient avoidance of obstacles, the use of available spatial features, and the rapid creation of mental maps of the surroundings (Amedeo, Speicher 1995; Hall 1990). Referring to James Gibson's (2015) concept, vision grants access to the visual affordances embedded in the environment, which prove highly useful for bodily movement and for interpreting, categorising, and navigating space (see Ingold 1992; Reed 1994).

Secondly, spatial orientation and independent mobility skills are essential to many socially determined tasks and activities that form the foundation of human life, such as work, family, health, leisure, and social relationships (Golledge 1993; Kitchin et al. 1997). In this context, the widely accepted image of what "normal" functioning—and specifically "normal" mobility—should entail is grounded in what Michael Herzfeld (2006: 240–241) refers to as "common sense": a culturally dominant, though often unspoken, assumption about perception, where the ability to see is treated as both a statistical average and a biological standard.

Thirdly, effective and independent use of space involves more than just the ability to move from place to place—it also requires following established social standards for mobility, orientation, and locomotion, adjusting one's movements to the expected pace, rhythm, and mode of travel, and using appropriate and accessible means of transportation. This integration of elements is clearly reflected in the process of automobilisation. It not only led to the widespread adoption of the car as the default mode of transport, but also triggered systemic and far-reaching changes in the organisation of space, time, the economy, family life, and, consequently, everyday practices, emotions, identity, and the sense of agency (Beckmann 2001; Dennis, Urry 2009; Featherstone et al. 2005).

1.2. Mobility of Blind Individuals

As many scholars consistently emphasise, the most significant difficulties that inevitably shape the situation of blind individuals relate to independent mobility and spatial orientation— particularly when navigating unfamiliar, disorganised, and changing environments (Foulke 1983; Smith 2004; Tuttle, Tuttle 2004). However, mobility challenges do not arise solely from the physical absence or severe restriction of the sense of sight, which would exclude blind and visually impaired people from "normal" spatial functioning, as implied by the medical model of disability (DasGupta 2015). They are also not just the result of poorly adapted environments or transport systems, shaped by institutional neglect or bias against bodies and perceptions that fall outside the statistical "norm," as the social model of disability argues (Campbell 2009; Oliver 2013). As I have indicated in the previous section, the relationship between the capacity to see—and thus also the inability to see—and mobility is far more complex, intertwining species-level, biological, social, and individual dimensions of human life.

Therefore, rather than searching for singular causes of these challenges, I propose drawing on the ecological model of disability, which—to put it simply—defines

disability as a mismatch between the resources and needs of the individual and the demands and offerings of the environment, understood not only in material terms but also in socio-cultural terms (Maiese 2019; Toro et al. 2020; Wiliński 2010: 66–67; Woźniak 2008: 65). Equally important is that the ecological model allows us to explore alternative ways of engaging with the environment—ones that match a person's perceptual and physical capacities and support, to varying degrees, the pursuit of their needs and goals. The proposed approach does not focus on external (social prejudice, inaccessible spaces) or internal (bodily limitations) causes of what is described as "disability". Instead, it reveals the contextual and relational nature of this category and makes it possible to trace the interrelations between the resources and challenges of the subject in their environment, which shape the individual perception of ability, agency, mobility, and independence.

This approach is closely related both to the concept of affordances (Gibson 2015; Ingold 1992; Reed 1994) and to Jakob von Uexküll's (2010) theory of Umwelt, both of which emphasise the embodied and functional nature of the relationship between an acting subject and the elements of the environment that are available, i.e., perceptible and usable. From this perspective, a blind person—like any other subject—experiences and acts within the world based on the elements of their surroundings that are accessible to them, and which, through the education of attention and engagement, are perceived as affordances: meaningful tools or sources of information. Thus, even though a subject perceives and acts in the world on their own terms, they can expand their abilities by learning to notice and make use of other features of the environment.

For blind individuals, the primary tools and supports for independent mobility and spatial orientation include the white cane, navigation technologies, sighted assistants (including professional assistants, family members, friends, and strangers), and guide dogs (Anvik 2009; Devlieger 2006; Hersh, Johnson 2008; Magnus 2024; Murata et al. 2019). Given the focus of this article, in the following sections I will examine the cooperation between blind and visually impaired individuals and guide dogs.

1.3. Guide Dogs

A guide dog is usually a Labrador Retriever, Golden Retriever, or German Shepherd, chosen for their good health and specific traits—such as low distractibility and a willingness to cooperate with people—and trained to lead a blind or visually impaired person safely and effectively (Arata et al. 2010; Craigon et al. 2017; Murphy 1998). The dog's role is to follow the direction indicated by the handler, stop at critical spatial points (such as stairs, kerbs, pedestrian crossings), avoid both horizontal and vertical obstacles, and locate and indicate useful features (such as doors, benches, bus stops). The responsibilities of the handler, in turn, include giving clear commands, maintaining spatial orientation and setting the route, correctly interpreting the dog's movements and decisions, motivating,

rewarding, and correcting the dog, and ensuring their safety and well-being (Bane 2021). A dog performs the role of a guide only when wearing a harness with a handle. When not wearing this equipment, they behave like any other companion animal—playing, going for walks, and resting.

The training process usually takes between 16 and 22 months and involves multiple participants, including volunteers who care for the dog during their first year of life, and trainers responsible for teaching specialist skills. Another crucial stage is matching the dog with their future handler, based on their character traits, body size, and walking pace. When the match is successful, the pair begin at least two weeks of joint training. This phase focuses on mutual communication, cooperation, recognising each other's needs and capacities, and building trust and relationship (Bane 2021).

In many countries, the training of guide dogs is managed by charitable and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Most often, trained dogs are provided free of charge. Assuming no health complications, a guide dog can work up to around the age of ten, after which it retires—either remaining with their current handler or living with other people (e.g. the handler's family, or volunteers).

Working with a guide dog enhances a blind person's mobility, improving their sense of safety and agency, walking pace, and spatial awareness (Bohan, Tuck Wah James 2015; Due, Lange 2018). In addition, working and living with a guide dog has emotional, social, and identity-related consequences. Outside their working role, the guide dog fulfils many of the same emotional needs as any other companion animal—such as the need for closeness, physical contact, and play (Magnus 2014b; Nicholson 1993). In public space, the guide dog often becomes a social facilitator providing a natural topic for conversation, enabling interactions, and prompting the exchange of stories (Deverell et al. 2019; Wiggett-Barnard, Steel 2008). In this case, what distinguishes the guide dog from "ordinary" dogs is the specificity of its work, which often prompts questions about their role and skills. Ultimately, the visual appeal and distinctiveness of guide dogs not only attract attention but also contribute to a more positive public image—and thereby identity—of blind individuals (Fishman 2003; Sanders 2000). Put differently, in everyday interactions, guide dog handlers are not seen solely through the lens of their visible physical difference. Instead, they are perceived as the caretakers of "clever" dogs or, in another version, as secondary to them (Michalko 1999: 89; Sanders 1999: 49).

1.4. Representations of a Guide Dog

The meaning and multiple roles of the guide dog, as well as the relationship between a dog and a human, are conveyed through a range of metaphors and comparisons, used by visually impaired handlers, non-governmental organisations, and researchers working on this subject. One of the most commonly used metaphors directly references vision, describing the guide dog as the blind person's "eyes" (Bohan, Tuck Wah James 2015: 62; Michalko 1999: 36–37). This appears in titles of guide

dog-related publications: *My Eyes Have a Cold Nose* (Chevigny 1946), *When Your Eyes Have a Wet Nose* (Fishman 2003). An example of this metaphor also appears in statements from participants in a study by Clinton Sanders:

> [This is] the kind of relationship that we will never have with a human being, and it's not possible with human beings.... People have often tried to find the human equivalent to the relationship I have with [my dog], but there isn't one. People ask me if she's my best friend, or if she is more like my child. [My dog] is my eyes. What is your relationship with your eyes? (Sanders 2000: 137).

The metaphor of the guide dog as "eyes" is also reflected in educational campaigns about guide dogs[1] and in the names of some organisations: Guiding Eyes (USA), The Seeing Eye (USA). Related associations include descriptions of the guide dog as a "prosthesis" meant to adjust to the user and restore functional capacity (Baar 2015), or as an "extension of the body" or even of the "self," which has been compared in some ways to walking with a white cane (Curtis 2017: 92–93; Kwong, Bartholomew 2011: 428).

Attempts to move beyond such metaphors based on the assumption of human–dog separateness and a hierarchical relation (dog as part of the person, dog as used by the person) have been undertaken by scholars who interpret this interspecies cooperation through the lens of the concept of assemblage (Due 2021; Magnus 2014b; Porkertová 2020; Stevenson 2013). This perspective focuses on continuous communication, coordination, and mutual adjustment between human and dog, who respond to one another's needs and ways of acting, forming a mobile, space-sensing "six-legged assemblage"[2] (Stevenson 2013: 1164).

Finally, it is worth noting that the role of the guide dog in the everyday life and emotional world of visually impaired handlers is described using the same imagery found among people living with companion animals. The guide dog may be referred to as a "child", "boy", "daughter", "family member", or as a "buddy" or "friend" (Kwong, Bartholomew 2011; Lockyer, Oliva 2020; Nicholson et al. 1995). This reflects the complexity and fluidity of the human-guide dog relationship, which varies depending on context and on whether the dog is currently working or acting as an "ordinary" companion animal.

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[1] *My Dog, My Eyes. A promotional film encouraging the accessibility of guide dogs*. Video published on the official YouTube channel of the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons in Poland: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Sa2o_tSL0c (accessed: 28.04.2025).

[2] In this article, I treat the concept of assemblage as one possible framework for describing the collaboration between a blind person and a guide dog, alongside other metaphors and representations discussed throughout the text. Notably, this concept has not entered common imaginaries and is not employed either by guide dog schools or by guide dog handlers themselves. At the same time, the interviews revealed other themes and images—such as unity with the dog, mutual dependence, tandem, or team—which could effectively be interpreted through the lens of assemblage theory (see Porkertová, Doboš 2025). However, this remains a subject for a separate article.

In the article, I focus on yet another metaphor, mentioned only briefly by a few scholars (Magnus 2014a, 2015; Michalko 1999), and used in various ways by participants in the research project I am conducting. Specifically, I examine the image of the "car", which research participants used to describe not only the nature of working with the dog, but also the dog's qualities and functions.

2. Research Methods

The research data presented in this article were collected as part of the project "Cooperation between blind people and guide dogs. Cultural and social determinants of the interspecies relationship", which I have been conducting since December 2021 in Poland and, to an additional extent, in Slovakia. The aim of the study is to analyse the cooperation, communication, and relationships between dogs and the people involved in the training process, including blind and visually impaired individuals who use guide dogs. The study participants include: 1) representatives of guide dog schools (NGOs) who manage the process of training and placing dogs; 2) junior and senior trainers; 3) volunteers who care for the dogs during the first 11–13 months of their lives; 4) clients of the organisations applying for a dog (candidates); 5) blind and visually impaired individuals who live and move around with the dogs, including both beginners and experienced handlers with their second or third dog; and 6) family members of guide dog handlers.

The study uses a range of qualitative methods, including IDI interviews with elements of biographical, conceptual, and projective techniques, participant observation, and the go-along method (Pietrowiak 2024). As part of the project, I conducted 112 IDI interviews (including 6 dyads), ranging from 50 to 220 minutes in length, most typically lasting between 110 and 130 minutes. A total of 84 individuals participated in the interviews, including 32 guide dog handlers. With some trainers and guide dog handlers, I conducted two or three interviews, mainly due to their experience in the field, but also because of their willingness to share their stories and reflections.

Participant observation took place in a variety of settings, including: puppy testing, volunteer training sessions, specialised dog training sessions, dog and trainer exams, candidate training and qualification sessions, guide dog-client matching, handover processes, dog and client exams, post-handover "service" meetings (at 6 and 12 months), independent cooperation between handlers and dogs, and home visits. My participation in dog training events and those involving their handlers was made possible not only thanks to the consent of the participants, but also due to the courtesy of the organisations and individuals managing the process. In total, I conducted approximately 700 hours of observation. Around 300 of those hours were spent accompanying participants during various walks and journeys with their dogs.

Interview participants gave their written consent to participate in the study. In the case of group training sessions, I asked the organisers to obtain verbal

consent from the participants for my presence, or—when possible—I requested such consent directly before the session. An important ethical as well as epistemological principle of the project was to invite participants to read and comment on early versions of articles and chapters presenting the research findings. The comments provided by the research participants have been briefly discussed at the end of the article and included in their original form in the project's research repository. This principle is inspired by Luke Eric Lassiter's (2005) model of collaborative ethnography, which advocates including participants in the co-creation of the research process at its various stages. At the same time, I do not treat this aspect of collaboration as a way to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations or observations (Kramer, Danielson 2016: 108), but rather as an opportunity to enrich the article with additional perspectives—an approach more closely aligned with anthropological conception of perspectivism and dialogical engagement (Field 2008; Rabinow 2011; Rappaport 2008). For this reason, I consider participants' comments as equally valid voices that offer their own interpretations of the text, rather than corrections or overrides of my interpretation of the previously collected data.

The recorded interviews have been transcribed and then coded using the MAXQDA software. The coding process was inductive and aimed at identifying the elements of guide dog training and life with the dog mentioned by the participants. The second stage of analysis involved cross–referencing the extracted codes and quotes with concepts from anthropology, sociology, and animal studies, which—through iterative cycles—proved to be more or less useful as interpretive frameworks for the collected material. Examples include the previously mentioned concepts: the ecological model of disability (Maiese 2019; Wiliński 2010), the concept of affordances and perceptual education (Gibson 2015; Ingold 1992; Reed 1994), and the theory of Umwelt (Magnus 2014c; Uexküll 2010). It is worth emphasising that the theoretical and analytical categories were not selected at the design stage of the study, but emerged and were revised throughout the data collection and analysis process—an approach commonly associated with ethnographic research (Gibbs 2007; Hammersley, Atkinson 2007; Winkin 1996).

Among the codes referring to metaphorical representations of the guide dog as eyes, a tool, a prosthesis, or an employee of the blind person, there also emerged the theme of a guide dog being as, or like, a car. This code appeared 12 times in interviews with guide dog handlers (GDH), and 6 times in interviews with trainers (TR), where it co-occurred with codes such as "training", "symbiosis", "extension of the body", "freedom", "independence", "costs of maintaining the dog", and "value of the dog". Additionally, the car metaphor appears in promotional materials published by some of the organisations I collaborated with during the project. This metaphor also appeared in research data presented in several publications on guide dogs (Curtis 2017; Magnus 2014a; Michalko 1999), in a book written by a guide dog trainer (Bane 2021), and a book authored by guide dog handlers (Witek 2023).

Although the metaphor and comparison of a guide dog being as, or like, a car is marginal within the overall body of data collected in the project, it opens up

several interesting research questions that I will address in abbreviated form in this article: 1) What features and functions of the guide dog are being captured through the metaphor or comparison with a car? 2) Which elements of walking with a guide dog are compared to driving a car? 3) What purpose might be served by comparing a guide dog to a car and the cooperation with them to driving?

3. Findings: A Guide Dog Being as, or like, a Car

Participants who used the metaphor or comparison of a car or driving to describe their cooperation with a guide dog referred to various elements of that process. One of these was the initial stage of learning to collaborate and communicate with the guide dog, which takes place during the two-week training supervised by a trainer. In this context, one participant who lost his sight in his teenage years compared the first weeks of working with the dog to learning to drive a car with a manual gearbox. As the quote below illustrates, both experiences involve similar challenges: stress, cognitive overload, and a sense of limited control:

> GDH_16: For me, it was annoying at first… Well, more stressful than annoying was having to remember everything. Maybe it's a silly comparison, but it's kind of like driving a car with a manual gearbox. You have to remember the clutch, the gear shifts, the signs. Transferring this to the dog—I have to read the dog, focus on the route, remember to feed him. That kind of multitasking is really stressful at the beginning. It led to situations where, if I focused too much on something, I'd start mixing things up laterally. Like I want to go left and I say «right, right». And then I'm confused. What's happening?

The theme of "learning to drive" also emerged in the account of one trainer, who described the first months as critical for the future cooperation and communication with the dog, emphasising the importance of the guide dog handler's commitment and development:

> TR_06: During the handover, you show the client different techniques. But that doesn't mean everything is smooth during the handover. They still have six months to learn that dog. It's like learning to drive. In the course, you learn the basics, but whether you become a good driver depends on you and your later experiences. […] You'll pick up the core skills, but to be a good driver, to really take care of the vehicle, takes time, self-discipline, and learning.

As the same trainer explained, much like with driving, the outcome of steady and diligent work between a blind person and a guide dog is the embodiment of specific skills. Over time, these skills become automatic, enabling quicker and smoother action. Importantly, in the trainer's narrative, this process applies equally to the person and the dog, who both learn to move together by developing

shared behavioural patterns. In this account, the dog is thus not presented as a car, but as a driver who has to learn how to drive:

> TR_06: But look, it's just like when you're driving a car. Some things become second nature—you don't even realise when you're pressing the pedals. When the dog stops at a crossing, why should they be focusing on anything else? They just stop. Sure, they have to find the crossing, but when crossing the street, it's automatic—left foot, right foot, stop, done.

A comparison between guide dog training and car use also appeared in the statement of another trainer, who used it to illustrate the specific characteristics of Labrador retrievers, especially their trainability and adaptability to new handlers:

> TR_13: A Labrador isn't some exceptionally intelligent dog. It's more like a big, ordinary "big Fiat" [Fiat 125p, a popular Polish car model from 1970–1995; author's note]. If it stops, you just take it somewhere, fix it, and keep going. That's why it's a good dog, but it's not a brainiac who'll try to outsmart you. At most, it'll dig in, maybe refuse to go, or want to go left instead of right. But it won't overthink things or have its own fantasies—it's just made that way. It's kind of rough-cut. That's what makes it a fantastic dog—easy to train and easy to hand over to different people.

The image of the guide dog as/like a car is most often used by visually impaired handlers to express positive emotions, satisfaction, and the sense of comfort that comes with working with a dog. This figure serves to highlight the qualitative shift in experience when moving from a white cane to a guide dog—a shift that is described as transformative. There are two ways in which this metaphor or comparison is used. The first is a change from a simpler or inferior mode of transport to a better one: "The difference between using a white cane and walking with a guide dog, at least for me, is like switching from a scooter to a Mercedes".[3] A more developed version of this comparison points to the benefits and values that such a change brings:

> GDH_06: A white cane is like a scooter. It's fun, because it lets you reach different places. It allows you to be free and independent. But a guide dog is freedom—it's like a Porsche cabrio, it gives you the wind in your hair. That wind of freedom and independence. It's a higher level. It's a matter of quality.

In the second variant, the switch from a white cane to a guide dog is compared to changing from one type or brand of car—usually smaller, less comfortable, and lower in quality—to another that is better, more comfortable, and more prestigious. GDH_23: "With a dog, it's like switching from a Polonez to a Mercedes"

[3] *My Name Is Dog, Guide Dog*. Promotional film by the Vis Maior Guide Dog Foundation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY5BoYDqiKk (accessed: 10.04.2025).

[FSO Polonez is a Polish car brand that was very popular in Poland between 1980 and 2000; author's note]. GDH_11: "When I run classes, I often use this phrase: Switching from a cane to a dog is like going from a "Small Fiat" [Fiat 126; author's note] to a Mercedes". Similar associations also appeared in research conducted by Sarah Curtis (2017: 116): "Using a guide dog instead of a cane, Olivia told me, is like using a Rolls Royce instead of a Mini Cooper. «Both get you to the same destination», she told me, «but in such a distinctly different way»".

The car motif, including references to the Mercedes Benz, also appears in the promotional film "See Us" published on the YouTube channel of the Vis Maior Guide Dog Foundation.[4] One of the foundation's clients highlights the simultaneous passivity and activity of the visually impaired handler when walking with a guide dog: "My life with a dog now is like driving a Mercedes. I go out with the dog and he simply takes me where I want to go". Another statement, although not referring directly to a car but to a vehicle more generally, emphasises the agency of the blind person and the movement facilitated by the guide dog: "When I grab the harness, I can say that I'm taking the controls—and by giving commands, I move toward my goal". The theme of locomotive cooperation and role division also came up in the account of one study participant. However, she did not portray the dog as a car being driven by the blind person, but rather as a driver following the instructions of a human navigator. GDH_01: "He is our eyes. He's like a driver. We're the ones making the decisions, and he's the one carrying them out. Without him, it would be hard for us. I'm the pilot, and he's the driver".

An insightful commentary on this type of imagery, and a creative expansion of the metaphor itself, appears in a book by Piotr Witek (2023: 194–195), who is himself a guide dog handler. Regardless of the particular images used by the author, they also aim to convey the same dimensions of cooperation with a guide dog (especially compared to a white cane), such as comfort, enjoyment, and relaxation:

> This comfort, in the eyes of some, grows to mythical proportions—among guide dog handlers there circulates a comparison that switching from a white cane to walking with a dog is like upgrading from a small Fiat to a Mercedes. In my view, however, this comparison is too general and doesn't fully reflect the actual difference—those who drive might better relate to the idea of switching from a petrol-powered car with a manual gearbox, stuck in traffic, to an electric one with autopilot. In such a ride, you no longer have to mind all those tedious details, and what used to be a tiring journey suddenly becomes quite pleasant.

Although similar associations did not emerge in the interviews I have conducted, examples from other publications in which guide dog handlers or trainers connect particular features or functions of a guide dog with those of a car are worth mentioning here. One such example can be found in the research by Riin Magnus:

[4] *See Us*. Promotional film published on the YouTube channel of the Vis Maior Guide Dog Foundation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7hOcQEXeCs&t=790s (accessed: 2.04.2025).

> That's another reason to use hand signals, because if you're moving with the crowd or whatever and the people coming towards you see that you're signalling to the dog that you want to go left, then they know that you want to go left. And so it also helps other people to know, what you're doing. […] It's like putting on the indicators on the car, isn't it (Magnus 2014a: 450).

Similar comparisons appear in the book by Christie Bane, an experienced guide dog trainer. Notably, the author emphasises the functional purpose of such comparisons: to illustrate certain aspects of working with a guide dog rather than reduce the dog to the status of a tool:

> A dog that does not go forward when asked is a little like a car that doesn't have a "Drive" gear; it defeats the purpose of having a guide dog. A guide dog that resists turns or has to be manhandled into turns is not a dog that anyone will enjoy working with (Bane 2021: 224).

> I do not want anyone to get the idea that a guide dog's speed can be controlled in the same way a car's speed can. Every dog has a natural speed that it is comfortable walking at while also making guide work decisions. Attempting to change that natural speed is inviting trouble. But sometimes you need a way to get an over-enthusiastic young dog to slow down—for example, in a crowded shopping mall, or when there is ice on the ground. And sometimes the dog has slowed down because of distraction and is not focusing on its work like it should be. In those cases, you need a way to step on the brake or the gas, so to speak (Bane 2021: 308).

In addition to the issues mentioned above, participants frequently brought up the economic value of dogs, specifically the cost of their training and maintenance, which can be compared to the price of a basic new car. In some cases, highlighting this fact was meant to help sighted people understand not only the emotional but also the market value of a guide dog. This kind of argument is also used when negotiating access to public spaces for guide dog handlers:

> GDH_30: A well-bred, neutered, and trained dog is very expensive. The entire training process costs around 20,000 euros. That's why I say I've got a "four-legged car" [laughs].

> GDH_23: One time an ophthalmologist told me: "Please don't enter with that dog!" – "But I'm allowed to". I showed her the document [guide dog certificate]. She said, "No. Tie her up outside before entering". "A dog worth sixty thousand [Polish zloty]? I could buy a car for that!".

> GDH_10: I wouldn't compare her to a car, although I always say that you don't leave a Mercedes with the keys in it outside a shop. But that's just to illustrate her value.

Finally, the comparison between a guide dog and a car also appeared in the context of comparing the mobility of blind and sighted individuals. In this case, participants emphasised the sense of independence, functionality, as well as the associated sense of "normality" that a guide dog brings:

> GDH_11: I want to live like they do. Maybe not exactly like them, but you know what I mean. When they want to go somewhere, they don't call an assistant—so I don't call or arrange one either. I just take my dog and go. They grab their car keys and drive off. It's kind of the same idea. Of course, there are situations where it's easier for them and harder for me, and then I do need to ask someone for help.
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> Researcher [at the start of the walk – along]: I guess she hasn't warmed up yet.
> GDH_23: You know what, she doesn't need to warm up. That's the beauty of it. I sometimes joke that my wife starts up the car, and I just grab the dog and start her up too.

What is worth noting at the end of this section is that some participants—also during the moments when I deliberately resumed the discussion on the topic—chose to withdraw from such comparisons or explicitly pointed out their limitations:

> Researcher: At our last meeting you said something like: "My friends have cars, and I have a dog".
> GDH_13: Did I really say that? [laughs] Maybe it's a kind of car... you do have to refuel her [laughs]. To me, the closest metaphor is that she's like my daughter, who helps me. She has an emotional bond with me. And I have an emotional bond with her. I don't know if people have that kind of bond with a car. Maybe they do but cars don't reciprocate it. That's why you can call a car a tool, but a dog is not a tool.
>
> GDH_23: Most people can't imagine what it's like to trust a dog, to be guided by a dog because they've never experienced it. They can imagine the responsibility involved—having to walk her, feed her, bathe her. I once said it's like switching from a Polonez to a Mercedes. It's that kind of comparison. Or from a wheelbarrow to a Mercedes. It's like someone who didn't have an arm and suddenly it was sewn back on. That's the level of difference. […] Someone compares it to a car, another person to a crutch after a cast comes off and they can walk again. But to me, it's not really comparable. It's underestimated. That freedom, the ability to move around independently, means so much to a blind person.
>
> GDH_06: People often use that analogy—that you've got cars and we've got dogs. But it's not the same, because a car isn't a living being. It's more like a rider in sync with a horse. Maybe that also brings a sense of freedom and independence.
> Researcher: But you used that comparison yourself in our conversation.

> GDH_06: Yes, but it was only to show the contrast—that the white cane is like a scooter that lets you get places and be free, and a guide dog is like a Porsche cabrio—several levels higher, offering so much more. It's just to help sighted people imagine what it's like.

Although using the metaphor or comparison to a car to describe the value and function of a guide dog is useful and illustrative, participants ultimately pointed to the inadequacy of such comparisons, which in their view fail to fully capture the specific, relational character of working with a dog and the related transformation in terms of independent mobility and sense of autonomy.

4. Discussion

Using the image of a guide dog as, or like, a car offers insight into the values and meanings that some participants attach both to moving with a guide dog and to driving a car. Linking these two modes of mobility—particularly by pointing out analogies and similarities—relates to various interconnected dimensions of experience shared by guide dog handlers and car drivers or owners: sensory, emotional, practical, and social.

Firstly, comparing walking with a guide dog to driving or being driven in a car refers to the embodied, sensory experience of guide dog handlers, which includes sensations such as smoothness and speed, comfort and pleasure, and an organic connection with the dog. Moreover, in trying to articulate the uniqueness of this experience, participants pointed to the simultaneity of being transported and directing, of control and trust, and to the ongoing reciprocity of actions and reactions between human and dog.

Such associations can be linked to the concept of assemblage, which various scholars have applied to both human–car and human–guide dog relationships (Beckmann 2001: 603; Dant 2004; Porkertová 2020; Porkertová, Doboš 2025; Thrift 2004). Just like in the car–driver connection, neither the human nor the dog alone can produce the actions that emerge from their assemblage (Dant 2004: 74). From this perspective, their cooperation—and the forms of mobility that emerge from it—are temporary and context-dependent, existing only in the moment of action. In the case of guide dog mobility, this refers to "working mode", when the dog is wearing a special, clearly marked harness with a handle. When led on a leash by a blind person, the same dog is no longer considered a guide dog in either a practical or legal sense.[5] These forms of mobility also depend on the skills and current condition or well – being of all subjects involved—the driver, the handler, and the guide

[5] *The Act of 27 August 1997 on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities*, Journal of Laws 2021, item 573 (consolidated text), Article 2(11), defines an assistance dog as "a properly trained and specially marked dog, in particular a guide dog for a blind person [...]". Source: https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19971230776 (accessed: 20.04.2025).

dog—as well as the technical condition and performance of the vehicle (Melosik 2020: 17; Urry 2008: 419–420).

Secondly, a key consequence of smooth and confident movement with a guide dog, as emphasised by many participants, is a sense of freedom, independence, flexibility, and comfort, benefits often associated with car ownership or driving (Maxwell 2001; Melosik 2020; Urry 2004: 28). The difference concerns the mode of mobility against which the car or guide dog is compared, a contrast that makes their respective advantages even more apparent. In the case of the car, the ability to own and drive one means independence from public transport systems, especially their routes and schedules, allowing full control over timing, distance, and destination (Urry 2008: 414–415). In contrast, participants pointed out that working with a guide dog reduces their reliance on sighted assistance and significantly increases their autonomy, safety, comfort, and walking pace compared to navigating with a white cane. Thus, both drivers and visually impaired handlers recognise similar affordances in cars and guide dogs—greater independence, agency, flexibility, and enhanced mobility. However, for handlers, this also involves a functional reduction in the sense of disability itself.

Thirdly, both modes of mobility are often accompanied by a strong emotional investment from the user toward their car or guide dog, expressed through care, attention, time, attachment, and pride (Lutz 2015; Sheller 2004). The accumulation of such positive emotions may lead individuals to perceive and experience their car or guide dog as an extension of their body and ego—both emotionally and practically—as "a part of themselves" without which "normal" life feels incomplete. As a result, the usefulness, meaning, and emotional value attributed to the car or guide dog may turn them into an important – and sometimes even central – element of personal identity and social status. They allow individuals to express their personality, values, aspirations, financial means, and taste (Cairns et al. 2014; Sheller 2004; Urry 2006).

Interestingly, participants employed different associations when describing the economic cost of training and maintaining a guide dog versus its symbolic value. In the first case, they mostly referred to "a car" in general ("I could buy a car for that", "a four-legged car") to highlight the guide dog's economic value. This argument was sometimes used in negotiations over access to public space with the dog, by emphasising the exceptional status of guide dogs. In the second case, they invoked specific car brands (Mercedes-Benz, Porsche), often contrasting them with other, implicitly inferior domestic models linked to the socialist era in Poland (Polonez, Fiat 126, Fiat 125p) or with simpler means of transport (a scooter). This choice most likely reflects not only the comfort or performance associated with these brands, but also the broader symbols they embody—notably luxury, exclusivity, and prestige (Melosik 2020). In the societies where the participants live, cars are no longer considered a luxury item but have become widely accessible and commonplace (Urry 2008: 412). Thus, the discussed metaphors and comparisons gain symbolic weight only when the guide dog is compared to luxury

car brands—a reference that is both recognisable to sighted people and effective in conveying the qualitative shift experienced by guide dog handlers.

Fourthly, the primary premise behind the use of the figure "a guide dog as, or like, a car" lies in the undeniable dominance and assumed "naturalness" of automobility in the modern world, which shapes the perception, experience, and organization of many aspects of daily life, such as space, time, infrastructure, the economy, law, family life, work, emotions, and social status (Beckmann 2001; Dennis, Urry 2009; Featherstone et al. 2005). Although in large metropolitan areas one can observe a social and systemic shift away from car ownership, often associated in this context with dependence, inconvenience (e.g., traffic jams, parking), and environmental harm, toward public or shared modes of transport (Klein, Smart 2017; Newman, Kenworthy 2015), cars still remain, on the whole, the most convenient and preferred means of mobility. I suggest that it is precisely the ubiquity of automobility that has shaped the imagination of the study participants, directing their associations toward cars and away from other theoretically useful but less popular and culturally current modes of transport, such as motorcycles or scooters.

Finally, the analysis of collected data points to the central role of the notion of "normality", which pertains both to driving as a social norm and to the stigmatizing perceptions of blind and visually impaired—and more generally, disabled—individuals as "abnormal," ill-fitted, or incompetent (Goffman 1963). In participants' narratives and other cited voices of blind individuals, this notion extends beyond functional benefits of using a guide dog to the domain of social identity and the desire for "normalcy" and agency – qualities typically attributed to "the sighted", and in this particular context, to drivers and car owners.

Positioning the guide dog in contrast to the white cane highlights not only functional and safety-related distinctions, but also the ways in which each is perceived by "the sighted". More precisely, while the white cane has become a visible "stigma attribute"—undesired and embarrassing for some blind people—the guide dog tends to elicit the opposite emotions: curiosity, admiration, and respect, which inevitably affect how the handler is perceived (Deshen, Deshen 1989; Omvig, Vaughan 2005: 157). Thus, a guide dog enables individuals to feel "normal", "like the sighted", and to redirect both external and internal focus away from disability and difference, toward agency and independence. The automotive metaphors and comparisons prove especially useful in expressing these needs and in articulating the transformations experienced by guide dog handlers, along with their personal and social significance.

As this analysis has shown, just as cars extend the possibilities for sighted drivers, guide dogs for blind and visually impaired individuals "[…] extend the possibilities of where people can go to, what they can do and thus who they are" (Dennis, Urry, 2009: 40). Both enable integration into the established order of movement—on sidewalks and roads—ensuring smooth mobility and synchronization with other space users (Redshaw 2008: 1). Both play a key role in building the mobility capital of their users, expanding their capacity for action, and thus

enhancing their sense of agency, independence, and activity (Dant 2004: 74; Kaufmann et al. 2004). As a result, both also contribute to the social and economic capital of their respective drivers and handlers, serving as expressive means for communicating personal values, aspirations, and status, while expanding potential in areas such as employment, social relationships, and leisure. Finally, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous line from *Totemism* (1991: 89), the comparison between a guide dog and a car is not only grounded in their functional affordances for movement and self-expression, but also in their capacity to be "good to think with"—open to meanings and attributes drawn from different domains of existence: mechanical, organic, animal, and human.

Notably, however, only a few research participants employed automotive metaphors and comparisons to capture the specific nature of working with a guide dog. Moreover, even those who introduced such associations on their own initiative ultimately emphasized that these metaphors are provisional and inadequate, strongly asserting that "a guide dog is not a machine". In other words, participants recognised the value of such metaphors and comparisons insofar as they did not imply an instrumental approach to guide dogs—an attitude noted and criticised by Rod Michalko (1999: 24).[6]

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how guide dog trainers and handlers describe the specific nature of their cooperation with dogs through the metaphor of the car or comparisons to cars. As the research data demonstrate, these associations go far beyond the instrumental view of the guide dog as a tool or machine. In contrast, the comparisons cited in this article are more multifunctional in nature—they refer to various dimensions of owning and driving a car and the related practices, meanings, symbols, and emotions.

The metaphor of the car and driving has thus proven useful for articulating certain aspects of the experience of working and living with a guide dog and, crucially, for translating them into language and emotions that are familiar and legible to "the sighted". At the same time, participants ultimately voiced awareness of the metaphor's limitations and inadequacy, partly due to concerns that it might imply an instrumental approach to the dog, and partly due to the unique nature of their relationship with the dog, which is difficult to explain to those who have never experienced it themselves.

As this article has aimed to demonstrate, the imaginaries of the research participants—as well as of other cited individuals involved with guide dogs—are embedded in broader systems of practices, norms, and technologies of mobility, most notably in the ubiquity and taken-for-grantedness of automobility. Hence,

[6] Rod Michalko documented such statements made by some guide dog trainers: "It's really like a car for sighted people. You drive it for a number of years and then get a new one".

it is worth considering in the near future how transformations in this domain, alongside the development of assistive technologies for blind and visually impaired individuals, may shape both the overarching concept of the guide dog as a mobility support for blind individuals and the particular roles and symbolic meanings associated with this type of service dogs.

One such change may involve the development of autonomous vehicles, which—assuming appropriate legal and ethical frameworks—could become a viable mode of independent transportation for blind individuals and others facing physical or perceptual challenges (Bissell et al. 2020; Laurier, Dant 2011). Another potential breakthrough could come with the refinement and popularization of robotic guide dogs, which might assume the roles currently fulfilled by their organic counterparts (Due 2023; Hong et al. 2022). Such "competition" could reveal the values and needs that inform the choice of one form of support over the other, and the extent to which this decision is shaped by considerations such as control, trust, predictability, communication, emotional labour, and the nature of the relationship itself.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the presented research. One of them was the lack of detailed exploration of the car metaphor during the interviews. Since it was only one of many themes addressed, I typically did not ask participants to elaborate on it, nor did I follow up with additional questions or probe for further associations. For this reason, future research might consider a more in-depth investigation of this narrative element among trainers and guide dog handlers, using projective techniques to better understand the purposes and frameworks within which guide dogs are compared to specific car brands or other modes of transportation. In addition, I did not undertake a detailed analysis of promotional materials from international guide dog schools or autobiographical accounts written by guide dog handlers, which could potentially reveal additional automobile-related associations.

Further research might also focus on the perspectives of individuals who prefer using a white cane despite having had experience working with a guide dog, and explore the metaphors and comparisons they use to describe these two modes of mobility. Finally, large-scale studies combining quantitative and qualitative methods could investigate how the narratives employed by guide dog handlers differ depending on the timing and circumstances of their loss of functional vision, as well as their prior practices and skills related to mobility and locomotion.

Participants' Comments

Some participants shared their comments after reading the draft version of this article; these have been archived in the project repository: https://repod.icm.edu.pl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.18150/VQFHPV. Their reflections largely point to the limitations of automotive metaphors and comparisons when applied to guide dogs, emphasizing instead the relational nature of working with a guide dog.

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SUMMARY

"You Can Compare It to a Car, Because a Car Gives You That Kind of Freedom": Automotive Metaphors and Comparisons in the Narratives of Trainers and Guide Dog Handlers

This article examines the metaphorical comparison of guide dogs to cars in the narratives of visually impaired handlers and trainers. Based on qualitative data collected in Poland and Slovakia, it explores how this metaphor is used to convey experiences of mobility, independence, trust, and competence. The car metaphor—found in references to specific brands, vehicle types, and driving experiences—helps articulate the practical and emotional value of guide dogs, often in contrast to the white cane. Framed through mobility studies and ecological model of disability, the analysis shows that guide dogs, like cars, extend handlers' agency and facilitate smoother integration into everyday spatial and social environments. At the same time, this metaphor reflects broader imaginaries of research participants shaped by dominant norms, symbols, and values related to automobility.

Keywords: automobility, blindness, disability, guide dog, mobility, white cane, visual impairment.