

# Between Mercury and Virgil: Metaphors for Generative AI in Career Guidance Practice

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## Abstract

**Background.** Generative AI tools (platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude and Perplexity, referred to in the broader Italian study as SIAG) are reshaping professional practice across knowledge-intensive occupations. Career guidance is no exception: practitioners increasingly integrate these tools into their daily work, yet the conceptual frameworks through which they make sense of this integration remain underexplored.

**Aim.** This paper examines the metaphors produced or elicited during nine in-depth interviews with Italian career guidance practitioners to describe the impact of generative AI on their work. It argues that these metaphors provide a particularly rich entry point into practitioners' perceptions, revealing not only operational dimensions but also emotional, relational, and professional identity dimensions of the human-AI relationship.

**Method.** The metaphors were collected during nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners from Northern Italy, recruited via purposive sampling from a broader mixed-methods study (n=81 questionnaire respondents). Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Metaphor analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, with categories emerging from the practitioners' own language.

**Findings.** Eight distinct metaphorical clusters were identified: amplification and empowerment; abundance and availability; omniscience and superiority; guidance and accompaniment; tool; emotional and relational support; ambivalence and critique; and collaboration. The analysis reveals a fundamental tension: practitioners simultaneously position generative AI as a superhuman entity ("like talking to God", "a super-consultant") and as an immature instrument requiring expert guidance ("a capricious child", "a toolbox"). This tension maps onto a broader distinction, observed across the dataset, between co-pilot use (rapid task-oriented queries) and co-thinking use (iterative, metacognitive dialogue). The title metaphors — Mercury's winged sandals and Virgil — crystallise this double positioning: the practitioner as empowered professional and as indispensable guide.

**Keywords:** *generative artificial intelligence, career guidance, career counselling, metaphor analysis, co-pilot, co-thinking, practitioner perceptions*

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid diffusion of generative AI tools has prompted significant scholarly attention to their impact on work, cognition, and professional identity. Within the field of career guidance, this transformation carries particular weight: guidance practitioners are not merely users of new productivity tools, but professionals whose core competence — facilitating reflective processes of self-exploration, decision-making, and career construction — is itself a form of applied human intelligence.

Research on AI adoption in the helping professions has increasingly recognised that practitioners' conceptual frames shape how they integrate, resist, or adapt to new technologies (Hughes et al., 2024; Bankins et al., 2024). Metaphor analysis offers a productive entry point into these frames: the metaphors practitioners spontaneously produce to describe their experience reveal how they conceptualise the human-AI relationship, position themselves vis-a-vis the technology, and negotiate professional identity in conditions of uncertainty.

This paper presents an analysis of metaphors produced during in-depth interviews with Italian career guidance practitioners as part of a broader mixed-methods empirical study. The Italian context offers a useful case: the national career guidance system is characterised by significant institutional diversity, including public employment centres, private outplacement firms, university services, and third-sector organisations. However, the interview sample analysed here mainly consists of practitioners working in private employment agencies, training agencies, HR firms, and freelance practice, and does not include practitioners working directly inside public employment centres.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the analysis within relevant literature on AI adoption in professional practice and on metaphor as an analytic lens. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the eight metaphorical clusters identified. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings, with particular attention to the co-pilot/co-thinking distinction. Section 6 connects this analysis to the broader study from which it derives.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Generative AI in professional and guidance practice**

The integration of generative AI into knowledge-intensive occupations has been analysed from multiple perspectives. Pandya and Wang (2024), in a scoping review of 101 publications on AI in career development, document a double-edged sword effect: AI tools streamline career development processes and extend the reach of services, but also generate job insecurity and ethical concerns around bias, data privacy, and over-reliance on automated outputs. Bankins et al. (2024), in a systematic interdisciplinary review of AI across career stages, map these dynamics across school, university, and established worker contexts, identifying significant gaps in research on AI literacy for practising professionals.

Within guidance and counselling, Hughes et al. (2024), in a Jisc-funded study on large language models in higher education careers provision, identify a persistent under-development of generative AI tools in careers services relative to other sectors. Their survey of careers professionals and students finds cautious but real openness to AI-assisted support, alongside consistent concern about reliability, data privacy, and the irreplaceability of human advisers for complex or personalised guidance. The study frames generative AI as a complement to, not a substitute for, professional practice: a positioning that resonates directly with the ambivalence documented in our metaphor data.

A particularly relevant distinction, emerging from both academic research and industry analysis, is that between co-pilot and co-thinking modes of AI use. The co-pilot mode treats AI as a productivity assistant: the practitioner delegates discrete tasks (drafting a CV, retrieving information) and receives outputs that are evaluated and integrated into existing workflows. The co-thinking mode involves iterative, dialogic engagement: the practitioner uses the AI as a thinking partner, with the interaction generating reflective processes that improve the quality of guidance judgements. This distinction echoes the extended mind hypothesis (Clark & Chalmers, 1998): generative AI, when used in co-thinking mode, becomes integrated into the practitioner's cognitive system rather than remaining an external tool.

## **2.2 Metaphor as an analytic lens**

The analysis of spontaneous metaphors in professional discourse has a well-established tradition in cognitive linguistics and qualitative research. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational work demonstrated that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but structure thought and action. When practitioners describe generative AI using terms borrowed from mythology, theology, or everyday objects, they are not decorating their speech — they are revealing how they conceptually organise their experience.

Metaphor analysis is particularly valuable in research on emerging technologies, where practitioners have not yet developed settled descriptive vocabularies. The novelty and complexity of generative AI create conditions in which analogical reasoning — mapping the unknown onto the known — becomes a primary cognitive strategy. The metaphors produced in this context offer a window into the meaning-making processes through which practitioners are navigating a genuinely novel professional situation.

## **3. Methodology**

The metaphors analysed in this paper were collected as part of a larger mixed-methods empirical study on the integration of generative AI into Italian career guidance practice (Evangelista, 2026). The broader study employed three instruments: an online questionnaire (n=81 practitioners), nine semi-structured in-depth interviews, and a post-interview evaluation questionnaire administered to seven of the nine interviewees.

The nine interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling, with two selection criteria: active practice of career guidance counselling, and existing use of generative AI tools in their professional practice. Recruitment relied on the author's professional network and on voluntary responses to calls circulated via LinkedIn and email. All were practitioners from Northern Italy. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted remotely, audio-recorded with participants' consent, fully transcribed, reviewed, and anonymised. The interview guide included a specific question inviting practitioners to summarise the impact of generative AI through a metaphor of their choosing.

Metaphor analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. All metaphorical expressions were identified across the full transcripts (not only in responses to the dedicated question), coded, and grouped into thematic clusters based on the underlying conceptual schema. Clusters were labelled using descriptions of the underlying mapping (e.g., "amplification and empowerment") rather than the surface metaphors themselves, to capture the shared logic across varied expressions.

Participant confidentiality was protected through anonymisation: interviewees are referred to as Op1 through Op9. All quotations are translated from Italian by the author.

## 4. Findings: Eight Metaphorical Clusters

### 4.1 Amplification and empowerment

The most frequently occurring cluster represents generative AI as an amplifier of existing human capacities. Op8 described GenAI tools using the image of Mercury's winged sandals:

*"GPT has given me wings on certain aspects of knowledge and exploration, but it hasn't replaced me. It has helped me discover new paths and accelerate certain learnings."*

The winged sandals metaphor is precise in its implications: they presuppose a human capacity to move (to know, to walk) that pre-exists the tool, and they accelerate rather than replace that capacity. Op7 reached for a spatial metaphor — the spacecraft — to capture a similar logic:

*"Something that takes you beyond. It takes you to the moon, and with a certain speed of response. Though we are still on the journey of the dog Laika: we are still at the beginning."*

Op7 also used the term accelerator: "artificial intelligence is definitely a great accelerator, especially for young people." These metaphors collectively construct generative AI as an extension prosthesis of professional capacity, consistent with Clark and Chalmers' (1998) extended mind thesis.

### 4.2 Abundance and availability

A second cluster emphasises the unprecedented availability of resources. Op9 described the arrival of generative AI as "manna from heaven" — unsolicited abundance appearing from an external source. Op4 used a visual metaphor of sudden spatial expansion:

*"Obviously the possibilities multiply and you see an umbrella opening up."*

These metaphors stress the qualitative rupture from previous conditions: resources that were previously unavailable or difficult to access have become instantly accessible. The emotional register is consistently positive, even slightly overwhelmed.

### 4.3 Omniscience and superiority

A third cluster attributes quasi-divine cognitive capacities to generative AI. Op2 explicitly described the experience of querying a GenAI tool as akin to speaking with a superior being:

*"Yes, exactly, because there really is everything and more. God knows everything; artificial intelligence has its faults and so on, but the impression you have is of someone above you who has all the answers."*

Op2 also described GenAI as "a super-consultant of the consultant": an entity with access to a knowledge base so vast as to exceed any individual practitioner's expertise. The hierarchical dimension is notable: "someone above you" introduces a relational asymmetry that complicates straightforward tool-use framings.

### 4.4 Guidance and accompaniment

The fourth cluster introduces an inversion of the hierarchy found in the previous one. Here, it is the practitioner who occupies the guiding position, while clients are positioned as those requiring accompaniment through an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous terrain. Op2 explicitly invoked the figure of Virgil from Dante's Divine Comedy:

*"Unless your client is a super-expert in artificial intelligence, the consultant acts as Virgil in the use of these tools."*

Virgil accompanies Dante through Hell and Purgatory, interpreting, protecting, and narrating what they encounter. The metaphor assigns the practitioner a role of epistemic and relational mediation: not merely facilitating access to a tool, but managing the encounter with an environment that is unknown, complex, and potentially disorienting. Op3 extended this frame by positioning GenAI itself as a guiding figure: "a mentor who checks my work" — reversing the relational direction, with the AI now guiding the practitioner.

#### **4.5 Tool**

A fifth cluster repositions generative AI within a more familiar professional logic. Op7 used the image of the toolbox:

*"What is your added value now? I keep improving the use of the tool. The objective is to make the best use of the toolbox to help the person in front of me."*

Op8 described GenAI as a "crutch" and as a "customisable encyclopaedia that can be consulted". These metaphors are notable for what they foreclose: in a toolbox, no single tool has inherent authority, and the practitioner's competence lies in selecting and using the right tool at the right moment. The technology is subordinated to professional judgement.

#### **4.6 Emotional and relational support**

An unexpected cluster emerged around emotional and relational dimensions. Op4 described a quality of the interaction with GenAI that went beyond task execution:

*"A comforting, yet serene and lucid dialogue with AI... a sense of support that I find completely new."*

Op3 attributed to AI "a very high level of empathy that can teach practitioners". These metaphors disrupt instrumentalist framings: they suggest that for some practitioners, the interaction with generative AI carries affective valence, operating as a form of professional support or validation that was previously unavailable.

#### **4.7 Ambivalence and critique**

Not all metaphors are positive. Op2 described the AI as "a rather capricious child": an entity that tends towards standard responses initially but "when you insist, it brings out its best". This metaphor inverts the hierarchy of the omniscience cluster: rather than a superior being, the AI becomes an immature subject requiring the guidance of an expert adult.

Op1 described AI as "stupid" in the specific sense that "it doesn't know the person" — it lacks contextual and relational intelligence. These critical metaphors are important correctives to purely enthusiastic accounts and reveal practitioners' sophisticated awareness of GenAI's structural limitations.

#### **4.8 Collaboration**

The final cluster positions generative AI as a collaborative partner. Several practitioners described extended working sessions with GenAI in terms that evoked collegial rather than tool-use relationships: a back-and-forth in which the AI's responses shaped the practitioner's thinking, which in turn shaped subsequent prompts. This cluster maps most directly onto the co-thinking mode of use discussed in the broader study.

## 5. Discussion

The eight clusters identified reveal a fundamental ambivalence in how practitioners conceptualise generative AI. At one pole, GenAI is figured as a superhuman entity — omniscient, divine, a super-consultant — possessing capacities that exceed individual professional expertise. At the other pole, it is figured as a subordinate instrument — a tool, a capricious child, a crutch — that requires competent human direction.

This tension is not a contradiction to be resolved but a structurally accurate perception of generative AI's actual properties. Practitioners perceive generative AI tools as outperforming individual practitioners on certain dimensions (knowledge breadth, text generation speed, consistency of output) while simultaneously requiring sophisticated human expertise to be used effectively (prompt construction, output evaluation, contextual judgement, relational attunement). The ambivalence in the metaphors reflects the genuine ambivalence of the human-AI relationship in guidance practice.

The Mercury/Virgil axis in the title of this paper crystallises two complementary dimensions of this ambivalence. Mercury's winged sandals — the amplification cluster — describe what GenAI does to the practitioner's own capacities: it accelerates, extends, and empowers. Virgil — the guidance cluster — describes what the practitioner must do in relation to clients encountering AI: interpret, accompany, and mediate. The practitioner is simultaneously empowered and indispensable.

These clusters may be read in relation to the co-pilot/co-thinking distinction that runs through the broader study. Metaphors in the tool, amplification, and abundance clusters appear closer to co-pilot use: the practitioner extracts specific outputs from the AI and integrates them into an otherwise unchanged workflow. Metaphors in the collaboration, guidance, and emotional support clusters appear closer to co-thinking use: the practitioner engages the AI as a dialogic partner, with the interaction generating reflective processes that are difficult to achieve alone.

The guidance cluster — and particularly the Virgil metaphor — points to an aspect of the practitioner's role that is often underemphasised in discussions of AI adoption in guidance: the function of mediating clients' own relationships with AI. Practitioners who see themselves as Virgils to their clients' Dante are not merely AI users but AI literacy educators, a role with significant implications for training and professional development.

## 6. Connection to the Broader Study

This paper draws on material from: Evangelista, L. (2026). *Tra Mercurio e Virgilio: l'integrazione dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa nella consulenza di orientamento. Un'indagine empirica sugli operatori italiani*. Amazon KDP. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19855951>

The full study presents: a review of national and international literature on AI in guidance and professional practice; a survey of 81 Italian practitioners (frequency of use, task-specific utility, perceived impact, GDPR practices); nine in-depth interviews, including a detailed analysis of the eight-function taxonomy of GenAI operations in guidance; the co-pilot/co-thinking distinction developed from both the survey and interview data; a post-interview evaluation questionnaire assessing the study's practical relevance for practitioners.

The metaphor analysis presented here corresponds to section 5.3 of the volume. Readers wishing to situate this analysis within the full empirical and theoretical framework are invited to consult the complete work.

The author welcomes correspondence from researchers working on related questions.

Additional materials related to this study, including an executive report, translated practitioner testimonies, and a paper on the co-pilot/co-thinking distinction, are freely available at: <https://www.orientamento.it/generative-ai-in-career-guidance-practice-evidence-from-italian-practitioners/>

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