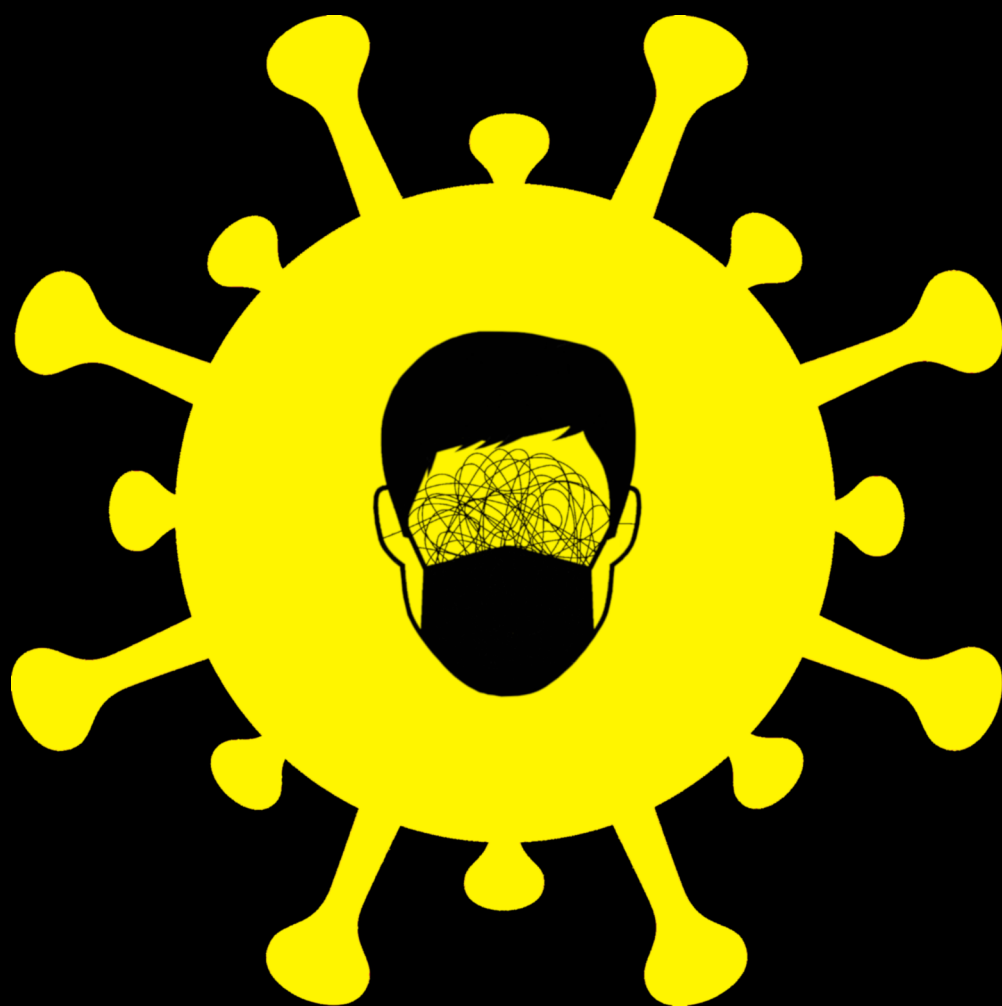


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Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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A new hearth? Defining social units during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract:

Slogans like ‘stay safe, stay apart’ stare at us at train stations, shopping malls, community centres and the like. The link between safety and separation has become a theme over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. The social units to be separated are the household and the bubble, the former an established social unit, the latter a pandemic creation. During the pandemic, strict rules govern (i) household mixing, including variously the rule of 1 other person, the rule of 6 and the rule of one other household, (ii) shielding, which is a prohibition on mixing, and (iii) bubbles, including childcare, care and support bubbles. These rules were perceived in various ways by the population subjected to them, with one prominent theme being the restriction of personal freedom (Duffy 2020). Three research questions emerge from this situation:

- (i) (How) does the household as a social unit fit into modern-day society?
- (ii) What is the process of defining successfully a basic social unit?
- (iii) (How) can one persuade people to trade their liberty for safety?

Keywords: COVID-19, Social Units, Support Bubbles, United Kingdom, Personal Freedom

1. Introduction

Slogans like ‘stay safe, stay apart’ stare at us at train stations, shopping malls, community centres and the like. The link between safety and separation has become a theme over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. The social units to be separated are the household and the bubble, the former an established social unit, the latter a pandemic creation. During the pandemic, strict rules govern (UK Government 2021a) (i) household mixing, including variously the rule of 1 other person, the rule of 6 and the rule of one other household, (ii) shielding, which is a prohibition on mixing, and (iii) bubbles, including childcare, care and support bubbles (UK Government 2021b). These rules were perceived in various ways by the population subjected to them, with one prominent theme being the restriction of personal freedom (Duffy 2020). Three research questions emerge from this situation:

- (i) (How) does the household as a social unit fit into modern-day society?
- (ii) What is the process of defining successfully a basic social unit?
- (iii) (How) can one persuade people to trade their liberty for safety?

Question (i) assesses the relevance of a well-established social unit (the household); question (ii) investigates the process of creating a new social unit (the bubble); question (iii) considers the application of social units in the context of government-led social management during the Covid-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to the interplay between prescription through authority and acceptance through agreement. Questions (i) and (iii) can be asked as existential yes/no questions or as exploratory comment-answer questions.

Sections 2 to 4 discuss the research questions set out one by one. Section 2 considers the concept of the household diachronically, showing how changes have taken effect over the millennia. Section 3 illustrates and discusses the process of defining a new social unit, the bubble, through the British Prime Minister's statements on coronavirus. Section 4 investigates the effect of the application of the defined social units using compliance data. Section 5 revisits the research questions and outlines avenues for future research.

2. The house and the household: (How) does the household as a social unit fit into modern-day society?

The fourth-century Greek philosopher Aristotle (*Politics*, 1252b12–15) defined the household (οἶκος) as the smallest building block of society (Nagle 2006). Five hundred years later, the Roman politician and orator Cicero considered the household a central social institution in his *De legibus* and *De natura deorum* (Bodel 2008). In the early Middle Ages, the household became a stable unit across society (Herlihy 1985). In eleventh-to-sixteenth England, a close link between the household and the family existed (Fleming 2001). The below approaches the house(hold) along the lines of Britain's (2013) Euclidean / physical space, social / manmade space and perceived / attitudinally-conditioned space. This three-fold distinction is born out in classical Latin terminology – *aedes* (Ingenkamp 2019: 1344) vs *domus* (Saller 1984: 342) vs *familia* (Gardner 2010, pp. 458–459).

The house as a physical space is the place of the hearth and the altar of the household gods, e.g. the Roman *Lares*, the guardians of the house, and the *Penates*, who kept foodstuffs and provisions safe (cf. Ovid, *Fasti*) (e.g. Flower 2017). They are referred to in inscriptions near the threshold (Ingenkamp 2019: 1345–1346). In imperial times, these guardian divinities acquired the role of protectors of the empire (the world-house) (Ingenkamp 2019: 1346), as visible e.g. in the *Carmen Arvale* (Willi 2017). The physical property or any part of it, such as the hearth, also serves as an administrative unit e.g. on tax records, most likely due to its tangible nature. E.g. in seventeenth-century England, '[e]ach hearth was taxed at the rate of 2 shillings a year, payable in two instalments' (Hey 2009; The National Archives 2021).

The house as a social space is a gathering place, e.g. to practise one's religion in a private setting and educate younger generations in social customs. A complex system of interdependencies structured the gathering place and ensured its continuous functionality. Hesiod's *Works and days* illustrates the transition from the small farmer to the landowner; Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* is 'equipped with mental and moral (leadership) abilities that make others look up to him'. By this point, the household consisted of the core family members along with staff (slaves and freedman) as well as kinsmen and business affiliates (e.g. Gardner and Wiedemann 1991; Bodel 2008: 248). Aristotle's *Politics* embeds

the household into the larger community of the *polis* (Ingenkamp 2019: 1344–1345), thus adding a layer of dependency above the household level.

Hierarchies and dependencies are neither tangible nor static. E.g. Gardner (2010, esp. p. 490) observes for the late Roman republic and the early principate the breakdown of earlier household structures based on the authority of the *paterfamilias* and the protection by the household divinities and their replacement by ‘Augustus’ evolving vision of normative family relationships’. Later, the advance of Christianity complicated the old hierarchical structures through ‘the addition of an all-seeing God to the domestic and civic hierarchies’ (Cooper 2007: 32). Reworking Aristotle’s thoughts, Thomas Aquinas notes that Christian thought superimposes divine law on top of human and natural law (Cendejas 2017: 31), e.g. as regards trading activity (Cendejas 2017: 34). The hierarchical structure of the household could be ‘a testing ground for a man’s ability to sustain relationships of reciprocity with dependants and allies’ (Cooper 2007, p. 7 on the Roman *domus*) and came to be perceived as one of ‘two halves of the same whole’ vis-à-vis the public sphere (Longfellow 2006: 319 and 321–326 on early modern England). The structure and ethical / moral values of the household thus attained immediate relevance to the sphere outside the house.

The house as a perceived space is the place of in-group practices. Applying the containment metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Charteris-Black 2021: 172–181), the house can contain positive and negative aspects. From the outside, the house(hold) is often viewed as a safe haven (Ingenkamp 2019: 1343–1344), e.g. by Homer’s Odysseus. Viewed from the inside, the house may be ‘a place of hardship, possibly of horror and crime’ (Ingenkamp 2019: 1343–1344), e.g. Aeschylus’ house of the Atrides, Sophocles’ house of Oedipus (Ingenkamp 2019: 1346) and Lysias’ wife of Eratosthenes (speech 1). While some in-group practices were open to audiences outside the house, for others the household ensured secrecy so as to preserve the illusion of perfect harmony (Cooper 2007, esp. p. 25).

The advance of Christianity complicated the ‘old dynamics of visibility and authority’ by adding an omnipresent God at the top of the hierarchy (Cooper 2007: 32). The conceptualisation of visibility in vs shieldedness from the public (privacy) fundamentally changed over time. Privacy as the space for the family and the non-political is viewed negatively until the end of the 17th century (cf. Locke and Habermas); from the 19th century, privacy as control of information that circulates about oneself becomes a valuable good (cf. Warren and Brandeis), nowadays enshrined in law (Longfellow 2006: 315–317 and 333). The notion of privacy in the sense of individualism arose in the context of rationalism and the enlightenment during the 18th / 19th centuries (Bristow 2017). These developments shifted the focus from the community to the individual and his/her personal role, rights, and freedoms (Filling 2015). In the wake of secularisation, the top layer of the former hierarchy (i.e. divine law and an omnipresent God) was removed (e.g. Dierken 2005). Due to the breakdown of the former hierarchy and the rise of the individual, the household as a perceived space gradually lost in importance.

While the household remained intact as an administrative unit (e.g. the census), it had yielded to loose-knit social networks in pre-Covid modern society (e.g. Dunkelman 2014; Pinker 2015), as reflected in living arrangements such as shared houses, student accommodation, and second homes, to suit people’s individual living circumstances. A social network is the people someone is in contact with (Bergs 2012; Conde Silvestre 2012: 335; Milroy and Milroy 2012). Social networks can be (i) close-knit vs loose-knit (i.e. the degree of mutual conversance of the members), (ii) multiplex vs uniplex (i.e. the number of social domains of interpersonal contact), (iii) strong or weak (i.e. regarding ties between members) (Conde Silvestre 2012: 333), and (iv) ego-centric (i.e. a dots-and-lines model with the individual in question in the middle) (Bergs 2000: 240) vs socio-centric (i.e. having a more global effect due to the structure of the network) (Conde Silvestre 2012: 335).

Urban / metropolitan settings see much population movement and subsequently relatively wide loose-knit social networks, as shown e.g. for 14th–16th century London (Conde Silvestre 2012: 338 with further references). Rural / local centres see less population movement often resulting in more close-knit social networks, as shown e.g. for the 15th century Paston brothers of Norfolk (Bergs 2000: 241–246, 2005). Factors such as ‘education, sex, position within the family, involvement in local or supralocal politics and extensive travelling’ (Bergs 2000: 251) as well as outside pressures (Bergs 2000: 246–249) on the part of the individuals influence the network structure that arises. In pre-Covid modern society, the effect of awareness of education, globalisation and the advance of digital media as well as heightened awareness of diverse family and living situations encouraged the development of loose-knit wide social networks, especially in young adults.

The margins of social networks are not determined externally, unlike the margins of the household: ‘one person living alone, or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room or dining area’ (since 2011) (Office for National Statistics 2019). Yet, the household became the unit to manage interpersonal contact during the pandemic. Applying Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) containment metaphor, the house(hold) has been viewed as a safe haven or an obstacle to liberty. Charteris-Black (2021: 172–181) shows that e.g. Britain, nations, and boundaries have been metaphorically viewed as containers in political messaging. People’s reaction to their social networks being made smaller or less satisfying than desired is loneliness (Bevinn 2011). During the pandemic, the term *lockdown loneliness* was coined. This type of loneliness is tied to the situation of not being able to engage with one’s social network during a governmentally imposed lockdown (Office for National Statistics 2020a), but being confined to the imposed context of the household.

3. Statements on coronavirus: What is the process of defining successfully a basic social unit?

Long et al. (2021: 2) describe how the Covid-19 pandemic has created ‘networks that were smaller and more homogenous’ than previously. The ‘relational cost’ of these changes warrants ‘that the language promoted by such policies (eg, households; families) is not exclusionary’ (Long et al. 2021: 3). As almost an intermediate between the household and the social network, the unit of the bubble was created. Bubbles differ from households, in that people do not live together. There are six types of bubbles that were established over the course of the pandemic: support bubbles, social bubbles, travel bubbles, biosecure bubbles, childcare bubbles and household bubbles (Charteris-Black 2021: 186 table 7.2). Charteris-Black (2021: 184–191) views the ‘bubble’ metaphor as a special form of containment: (i) It is ‘a flexible container’ and ‘its usual meaning in English has been rather negative’ (Charteris-Black 2021: 184); (ii) It is a fragile container, which can burst as soon as people no longer voluntarily accept the confinement (Charteris-Black 2021: 187 and 189); (iii) It is a transparent container (Charteris-Black 2021: 188).

The below investigates the process of defining and implementing successfully basic social units in the official press releases entitled ‘Prime minister’s statement on coronavirus’ by the British Prime Minister’s office between 16 March 2020 and 16 March 2021. The 52 relevant statements account for 49,556 words. The releases are accessible under <https://www.gov.uk/government/latest?departments%5B%5D=prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street> (accessed 02 June 2021). The Prime Minister’s statements, unlike media releases or social media forums, form an internally cohesive corpus of texts as the occasion and setting of these statements remained unchanged over the course of the pandemic year. The Prime Minister represents the government’s voice as it were.

Communicating the Covid-19 pandemic top-down (esp. governments to populations) and bottom-up (esp. grassroots efforts and community responses) has generated much scholarship. Every message is sent (i) through a specific channel, (ii) has a specific content, (iii) takes a specific form, and (iv) has a specific effect, whether intended or unintended. For example, Lewis et al.'s (2021) edited volume dives into the 'media and communication ecology of the Covid-19 pandemic' (Lewis et al. 2021: xi). Montiel et al. (2021) find five main storylines in the statements by heads of state during the pandemic: enforcing systemic interventions, upholding global unity, encouraging communal cooperation, stoking national fervour, and assuring responsive governance (Montiel et al. 2021: 752–756) – these storylines can be organised along the horizontal axis of loci of pandemic interventions (i.e. agentic vs structural rhetoric) and the vertical axis of hierarchical orientations (i.e. top-down enforcement vs egalitarian solidarity rhetoric) (Montiel et al. 2021: 760). Semino (2021) shows the variety of metaphors available, especially in the context of the Twitter campaign #ReframeCovid. Berube's (2021) edited volume considers the efficacy of communication during the pandemic with the aim of 'building resiliency among stakeholders' (Berube 2021: vi). In short, the Covid-19 pandemic has generated its own imagery, themes and discourses and has impacted significantly on the ways we communicate (Thorne 2020).

The present article is specifically interested in the way the British Prime Minister communicated the social units of the household and the bubble and dealt with people's responses. The selected dataset is analysed quantitatively using Sketchengine (Kilgariff et al. 2014) and Voyant (Rockwell and Sinclair 2016). Sketchengine allows to generate concordances and n-grams from large corpora. Concordances are vertical tables of the surroundings of an item. They serve to assess the links between the item and its morphosyntactic and lexical contexts. N-grams are clusters of a predefined lengths of regularly co-occurring items (e.g. *stay at home*). Voyant allows to generate word density counts. The selected dataset is analysed qualitatively, from the perspectives of style and speech-act theory.

3.1 Immediate context of the key terms

The distribution of instances of the key words 'household' and 'bubble' shows that the unit of the household was established pre-pandemic, whereas the unit of the bubble was created after the first lockdown. The household appears to be the base unit with the bubble as a subordinate alternative, judging by their frequency of mention (51 instances of 'household' vs 12 of 'bubble'). Although a range of bubbles were created only 'support bubbles' feature prominently in the Prime Minister's statements (11 out of 12 instances of 'bubble' show the n-gram 'support bubble').

The immediate context of 'household' and 'support bubble' shows that both are social units used to schematise social contact.

household as noun 51x ...

modifiers of "household"	nouns modified by "household"	verbs with "household" as object	verbs with "household" as subject	"household" and/or ...	prepositional phrases	pronominal possessors of "household"
single ... single adult households	isolation ... household isolation	switch ... switch the household	think ... household thinks	bubble ... household or support bubble	... in "household" ...	your ... in your household has
adult ... adult households	outside ... household outside	allow ... allow single adult households	continue ... households continue	July ... July , your household	... with "household" ...	their ... their own household
own ... own household	contact ... household contact	bring ... bring many households	have ... in your household has symptoms	example ... example , two whole households	... outside "household" ...	
other ... with one other household		say ... say three households		outside ... outside or 2 households	"household" in ...	
different ... different households				child ... household , and children	... from "household" ...	
same ... in the same household					... between "household" ...	
multigenerational ... multigenerational households					... of "household" ...	
multiple ... multiple households					"household" at ...	
whole ... Whole household						
many ... many households						

Figure 1: The context of 'household' (Sketchengine).

For example, the first three columns of figure 1 show the types of households referred to (column 1, e.g. *multigenerational household*), a clear inside-outside perception concerning social units (column 2, e.g. *isolation*, *outside*) and permissible patterns of interaction between units (column 3, e.g. *switch*, *allow*).

bubble as noun 12x ...

modifiers of "bubble"	verbs with "bubble" as object	verbs with "bubble" as subject	"bubble" and/or ...	prepositional phrases	adjective predicates of "bubble"
support ... support bubble	form ... form a support bubble	develop ... bubble develops	household ... household or support bubble	... of "bubble" ...	large ... bubble is larger
exclusive ... exclusive support bubbles		be ... bubble is		"bubble" at ...	
				... in "bubble" ...	
				"bubble" with ...	

Figure 2: The context of 'bubble' (Sketchengine).

Figure 2 shows a similar picture for the bubble, e.g. *support bubble* (type of bubble, column 1), *exclusive bubble* (inside-outside perspective, column 1), *form a bubble* (permissible patterns, column 2). However, the smaller number of instances makes the picture less pronounced than for the household.

People's reactions do not feature in Johnson's updates. There are four relevant instances of 'lonely' and 'loneliness'. All of them are directly linked to the social units of the household and the bubble. However, the small number of relevant instances indicates that there is no discussion of these social units and their impact but that they are considered accepted.

3.2 Wider context of the key terms

In Speech-Act theory, any utterance has an illocutionary force, that is it does something (e.g. a promise), and a perlocutionary effect (e.g. persuading), that is it has an impact on the listener (Searle 1969; Austin 1973; Crystal 2008: 358 and 446). Our key terms appear in declaratives (i.e. statements) and directives (i.e. commands) as regards the illocutionary force of the surrounding passages.

Term	Directive	Declarative	Stay at home / socially distance	Gather / mix	If you have symptoms	TOTAL
Household	22	29	24	22	5	51
Bubble	4	8	6	5	1	12
Loneliness / lonely	∅	4	4	∅	∅	4
TOTAL	26	41	30	27	6	67

Table 1: The pragmatics surrounding the key terms

More specifically, the key terms appear in (i) directives against social contact (e.g. *stay at home*), (ii) permission to gather to a limited extent (e.g. *you can meet one person outside of your household outside*) and (iii) conditionals on having symptoms (e.g. *if anyone in your household has either of the symptoms*). Thus, the perlocutionary effect is persuasion and / or fear. This is unsurprising since these basic social units feature in explanations and commands addressed to the population.

Austin (1973) and Searle's (1969) felicity conditions help to determine whether the relevant passages are felicitous, that is appropriate / suitable / possible in a specific social situation (Crystal 2008: 31). (i) The *Propositional-content condition* holds that the interlocutors know how to use language correctly. For example, a promise must be about the future. (ii) The *Preparatory condition* holds that the speech act needs to be embedded in a setting that is appropriate for it. For example, not everyone has the authority to christen or arrest. (iii) The *Sincerity condition* holds that the speaker must be sincere about the content of the utterance. (iv) The *Essential condition* holds that all the parties concerned must truly want the result of the speech act. For example, the speaker is committed and able to accept an item that they requested and believes the listener to be able to supply the item (Crystal 2008: 188).

In the coronavirus updates, the *Propositional-content condition* is met, in that it is clear to the Prime Minister (the speaker) and the population (the audience) that what is said are commands / prohibitions / warnings and at times explanations. The former relate to the future, the latter to the past. By contrast, the *Essential condition* is not met, in that the Prime Minister is requesting something from the population without knowing whether they can deliver. Recent surveys on the impact of lockdowns on people's mental health (Singh et al. 2020; Chandola 2021; Evans et al. 2021; Office for National Statistics 2021a), increasing criminality and domestic violence (Office for National Statistics 2020b; Krishnakumar and Verma 2021) and large-scale emergency programs to rebuild the economy would suggest they cannot deliver.

The *Preparatory condition* raises the question of whether the setting of informing and instructing the population about the pandemic is a context suitable for defining basic social units. Does a democratically elected government have the authority to do so? Is this definition clearly relevant to the Covid updates? The historical overview in Section 2 suggests that social units develop naturally and gradually, i.e. that change happens by acceptance through agreement rather than prescription through authority. The bubble is a pandemic creation; the household lingered in the background for a long time, increasingly confined to official administrative contexts before the pandemic.

The *Sincerity condition* is a thorny issue. Deliberative oratory, such as the coronavirus statements (Toye 2013), aims at 'effective and persuasive speaking and writing' (Crystal 2008: 416). In order to be persuasive, politicians often draw on hyperbole (exaggeration), etc., since blunt reality is rarely

persuasive or convincing, but their subsequent actions do not match their words. A complicating factor in the context of the pandemic is the rapidly evolving situation, which made statements even if spoken sincerely one day void the next day.

Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, 1356a1–4) breaks down the success of a piece of oratory to the speaker's authority and trustworthiness (*ethos*), the understanding of and accommodating to the audience and thus winning their favour (*pathos*) and the clarity and weight of the argument (*logos*). The previous paragraph touched upon the *ethos*; the *pathos* is considered further in Section 4. The *logos* often displays a careful crafting of the language. One aspect of this is rhetorical figures (Tindale and Benson 2012; Harris 2016). The most frequent ones in the dataset are:

- Hyperbole (i.e. exaggeration, e.g. *a huge and unprecedented programme of support*);
- Repetition (primarily of key ideas and phrases);
- Rhetorical question (such as *Why are we doing this?*);
- Hedging of claims and commands (e.g. *if we could*);
- Listing points for reasons of clarity (e.g. *firstly, secondly*);
- Metaphors and imagery (primarily related to the second world war, beating an enemy, and heroic deeds);
- Praeteritio (i.e. the seeming omission and consequently emphasis of a point).

However, the range of rhetorical figures applied to the key terms referring to social units is much smaller: (i) 'Household' appears in lists (primarily of rules), examples (primarily for explanatory purposes), conditionals (primarily in the context of commands), and emphatic constructions (such as *even if, the critical thing, strictly observe, I want to stress, at all times*), especially negative ones. (ii) '(Support) bubble' appears in examples, conditionals and emphatic constructions (such as *unfortunately, I want to stress*), especially negative ones. (iii) 'Loneliness / lonely' appears in examples and emphatic constructions (such as *particularly, at particular risk of*). The absence of rhetorical camouflage indicates that these are basic social units, not to be discussed or negotiated.

Austin and Searle distinguish between misfires, when for instance the *Preparatory condition* is not met and the utterance does not achieve the intended result, and abuses, when the *Sincerity condition* is not met. Misfires will impact negatively on people's trust in the government; abuses may impact negatively on people's loyalty to the government. It seems that misfires and abuses appear in the government's rhetoric, such that the statements miss their intended goal.

4. Compliance: (How) can one persuade people to trade their liberty for safety?

Section 3.2 mentioned several studies on the impact of the pandemic and the recurring lockdowns on (i) the mental health of different groups of people (e.g. students), (ii) rates of criminality and domestic violence and (iii) the economy. Moreover, the *Office for National Statistics* (ONS) (Office for National Statistics 2021b), *University College London* (UCL) (University College London 2021) and *King's College London* (KCL) (Duffy 2020) have assessed people's attitudes towards the Covid-19 rules, primarily under the aegis of compliance with hygiene measures (ONS), with testing and self-isolating (UCL) and with regard to the perception of the restrictions (KCL).

We gauge people's reaction to something by assessing their (visible) emotional response to it. Emotion is 'an imprecise term for any affective psychological state, including happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, surprise and fear' (Chandler and Munday 2011 s.v. emotion). People's affective responses to the government's tackling of the spread of the virus seem negative. KCL's study found that 24% of the

26% of the UK population who now find it harder to comply with Covid rules said that ‘people’s personal freedoms have been restricted too much already’. Thus, people do not see a sufficient trade-off effect (i.e. safety vs liberty). Out of KCL’s same 26%, 34% said that ‘the restrictions are not being applied fairly to everyone’. This indicates a sense of division.

Most models of liberty start from McCallum’s triadic relation *x is (not) free from y to (not) do / become z*. X is an agent, usually a human individual; y is an obstacle or constraint of some kind; z is the agent’s liberty, that what the agent could do if there was not y. The tradition of republican liberty has extended this triadic relation to a quadratic one: ‘(1) x, the citizen, is free (2) from y, domination, (3*) through z*-ing, acting virtuously, (3) to z, act as she otherwise could’ (Filling 2015, p. 9). Here, liberty is freedom from domination, i.e. the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with certain choices that the citizen can make (Pettit 1997, pp. 22 and 52). Classical thinkers including Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau considered the surrendering of certain natural rights in returns for e.g. safety in the republican context a social contract (Sorell 2002; Johnston 2014).

During the pandemic, the trade-off envisaged is protection from the virus through separation and isolation in return for the acceptance of domination. Separation and isolation are achieved by defining units to be separated. These units (households and bubbles) are smaller and more clearly circumscribed than the loose-knit social networks of modern globalised society. Moreover, the separation of units is policed. Thus, people perceive their social networks as smaller and less satisfying, resulting in loneliness (Bevinn 2011; Pinker 2015). Moreover, people perceive governmental domination as the hindering factor to return their social networks to a satisfactory state, resulting in rebellion.

Convincing people to trade their liberty for safety seems almost impossible in this situation. Noticeably, the otherwise prominent theme of following the data is not relied upon when defining social units. Persuading people is attempted with directives (illocutionary force) resulting in fear (perlocutionary effect). However, Austin and Searle’s preparatory condition seems violated, in that the setting is not appropriate and / or suitable for the definition of social units. This results in a misfire, i.e. the message does not have the intended effect.

In Aristotelian terms, the content of the message seems clear and unembellished (*logos*, cf. Section 3.2), but the speaker may be inappropriate for the message (*ethos*, cf. Section 3.2), and understanding for the audience’s perspective remains unexpressed (*pathos*, cf. Section 3.1). This creates a disconnect between the speaker and the audience. The audience consists of emancipated individuals (cf. Section 2) who are not used to domination but to negotiating meaning. They are unlikely to be receptive to the change in tone, i.e. prescription through authority. This is reflected in the above-cited compliance rates.

5. Summary and conclusions

Sections 2 to 4 addressed the research questions set out in Section 1 one by one:

- (i) (How) does the household as a social unit fit into modern-day society? By considering the concept of the house(hold) diachronically, Section 2 showed (i) that the house(hold) can be viewed as a physical, social and attitudinal space, (ii) that from early on the container metaphor was relevant, in the sense of a safe haven and a restrictive prison, and (iii) that the concept underwent substantial changes, e.g. with the advance of Christianity or the birth of the modern notion of privacy, and yielded to loose-knit social networks in the globalised pre-pandemic society.

(ii) What is the process of defining successfully a basic social unit? By linguistically analysing the British Prime Minister's statements on coronavirus between March 2020 and March 2021, Section 3 illustrates the process of defining a new social unit, the bubble. The bubble seems to be an attempt to cater for the diverse living arrangements in pre-Covid society. However, the messages sent about bubbles and households seem to constitute misfires in the terms of speech-act theory, i.e. statements that are not spoken in the appropriate setting for their intended purpose. Relevant messages are often directives eliciting fear, thus attempting to force prescription through authority onto the audience instead of the historically attested acceptance through agreement when it comes to basic social units.

(iii) (How) can one persuade people to trade their liberty for safety? By linking compliance data to the republican model of liberty, Section 4 outlines the difficulty of persuading and / or convincing people to accept the trade-off between safety and non-domination during the pandemic. Governmental rhetoric seems to have relied on prescription through authority rather than acceptance through agreement and to have met with backlash on the part of the population. In addition to the violation of the preparatory condition already mentioned, the statements on coronavirus do not appeal to the audience's stance (Aristotle's *pathos*), thus exposing the speaker to criticism.

Questions (i) and (iii) can be asked as existential yes/no questions or as exploratory comment-answer questions. While question (i) returns a positive answer, in that the household was backgrounded but not absent in pre-Covid society, question (iii) returns a negative answer, in that persuasion is relatively ineffective to a large extent due to the inappropriate setting and the lack of consideration for the audience's stance.

In future, it would be interesting to investigate in more detail what the accepted circumstances for the definition of social units and their communication have been, for instance using Biber and Conrad's (2009) framework of register, genre and style.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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