'Bubbles', 'Cocoons' and the 'Petri Dish': Spatial Metaphors and the Pandemic.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic there is a requirement for those interested in the language of public and media communication to consider metaphors based on spatial frames that have contributed to public communication and policy formation as well as critical comment of such policies in the media. This talk will analyse and discuss concepts (metaphors, metonyms and symbols) related to the 'container' frame using a corpus of UK press articles (Nexis) collected in the period March to September 2020, supplemented by social media.

Containers – the hazmat suits, masked faces, and plastic bubbles around patients' heads – have become key symbols of the pandemic. In their quest to control the virus, governments worldwide have sought to protect their populations through metaphors deriving from objects that create spatial separation. People have been instructed literally to remain in their homes and *metaphorically* to keep to 'social bubbles' and those must vulnerable to the disease have been instructed to 'cocoon'. Such instructions are employed to influence social behaviour by encouraging people to limit the amount of contact they have with others.

Containers, such as houses, or wombs are intended to protect, nurture and save the lives of people within the container – whether literal or metaphoric. I suggest that a conceptual metaphor SAFETY IS STAYING IN A CONTAINER places value on what is in the container because it protects this valued entity from the danger and threat posed by an external entity that is always searching for a secret way in - by subterfuge or guile. By contrast, in other cases social units, such as care homes, universities and prisons are represented as containers strongly associated with spreading the disease within a confined space where it is trapped. The conceptual frame CONTAINERS ARE BOUNDED SPACES provides the basis for quite different conceptual metaphors such as: CONTAINERS ARE PRISONS and DANGER IS REMAINING IN A CONTAINER.

In analysing this spatial metaphor I consider the function or purpose of the container, what is separated by it, its size and other properties. From a critical linguistic perspective the container sometimes *protects* the contained entity from external threat, while, paradoxically, at other times the container endangers, and even kills, what is contained. Rhetorical analysis needs to identify agency: is the agent a government that is forcing people against their will into a container and therefore does the metaphor become an image of entrapment, or is the agent people who have voluntarily placed themselves within the container for their own protection? The complex contrasting evaluation of the spatial frame and its close relation to embodiment theory makes the container metaphor a central one for understanding the rhetorical motivation of metaphors during the coronavirus pandemic.