Learning to say ‘we’
- On individuals and communities in a decentralised organisation

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Learning to say ‘we’ - On the concept of ‘decentralisation’

Introduction
Recent years have seen a steady increase in organisational changes in ‘The Bank’—some more successful and than others. One of the more successful measures—if you ask the employees and look at the Bank’s bottom line—is a comprehensive decentralisation process.

The success of the decentralisation process has been overwhelming but speculations have already begun as to whether the impressive results lend themselves to the decentralisation process or whether "you simply can’t fail” in these times of general prosperity and an impressive and long-lasting economic boom. People start to ask themselves: What will happen in times of economic recession? Will the decentralisation then backfire and make it impossible for The Bank’s central management to outline a strategy that will see The Bank through a period of recession when the branches are left to their own devices and minding their own interests and not the overall interests of The Bank. Will The Bank as an organisation disintegrate, will it stop functioning as an organisation and will the decentralisation project eventually fail? The aim of this paper is to consider the concept of ‘decentralisation’ in an organisational decentralisation process. I.e. to examine how The Bank maintains a notion of an integrated organisation in an environment which seeks to promote decentralisation and self-management. In order to investigate this, we shall analyse the language used to describe a decentralisation process in an interview with a branch manager.

Debates on centralisation and decentralisation are classics in organisation and management literature. Debates are often concerned with the degree of centralisation vis a vis decentralisation, and, from there, the organisation structure. Such debates are often reduced to either decision theory (Mintzberg 1983: 95, e.g. “Here we shall discuss the issue of centralization and decentralization in terms of power over the decisions made in the organisation”). Or to a discussion of the degree of planning compared to the chaotic and de-central governance of the marked (March & Simon 1958: 221-232), or simply to a matter of control (Child 1984). The discussion tend to focus on structures and is not concerned with the everyday life of the actors involved and the way they try to function in and with systems that are centrally controlled and simultaneously hold large elements of decentralisation.

The aim of this paper is to investigate – conceptualise – the concept of decentralisation as it is understood in the branches of The Bank (Henriksen et. al. 2004, Jørgensen 2007). In order for the decentralisation project to work as intended, it needs to be interpreted in the branches and the HQ needs to communicate the intentions of the project. To analyse this process of communication and interpretation we made an interview with a branch manager in The Bank and consider his interpretation of decentralisation.
Decentralisation

Centralisation and decentralisation are often seen as absolutes, as a dichotomy or as two ends of a continuum. This is very understandably as many managers, especially middle managers, see an endless stream of management initiatives that seeks to either centralise or decentralise. This is often felt as a never-ending pendulum swing, going back and forth from the two extremes. Initiatives are often presented as either decentralisation that will set people free or as centralisation that will tighten up things after too many failures made by local management. If this is the case, seen from a practitioners point of view, it is easy to see the dichotomy. This becomes even more understandable, when we turn to the lighter side of management theory. Here the dichotomy is often described as two opposites with each its pros and cons.

Centralisation is described as meaningful as long as it is able to secure cross departmental planning, managerial overview, and control and the positive consequence of this is better utilisation of scarce resources. The drawbacks of centralisation is just as obvious, as most problems of bureaucratised organisations can be found under the exact same conditions: red tape administration, decision making made by ill-informed top management, not having the professional insight necessary to conduct the everyday work of local departments, etc. This is well known and the answer is often decentralisation (Child 1984; Carlisle 1974).

The positive side of decentralisation is freedom. For top management it is freedom from getting tangled up in decisions about everyday routine work and freedom to concentrate on more important matters. It is also freedom for local managers to decide how their particular department should be run, and at least in theory, the same middle managers become more responsible in terms of financial matters and awareness of scarce resources increases and with that the motivation and job satisfaction. This is good, but as with centralisation, too much of a good thing may not paint a pretty picture. Decentralisation is just as easy a victim of red-tape-administration as is centralisation. When top-management wants to know, or control, or even intimidate, decentralised units are subjects to tests, evaluations or other measures and the centre’s need for coordination is not necessarily less obvious in a decentralised organisation.

All this is well-known textbook stuff, and even though it sounds plausible enough, this one-dimensional model is not sufficient for understanding the complex processes of decentralisation. Selznick (1949) has dealt more elaborately with the problems of decentralisation. In his studies of The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) – an independent governmental organisation responsible for agriculture and environment in the Tennessee Valley – he found many of the same problems as in the textbook model above, but he also found more deeply rooted problems of the centralisation decentralisation problem. In the beginning of his book Selznick gives several reasons why decentralisation is a necessity. First of all Selznick sees a worldwide spread of bureaucracy, followed by an equally strong tendency to centralise social and economic life and of public authorities (Selznick 1949: 22-23). According to Selznick this centralisation is ambiguous, as it does, in many instances, lead to large improvements in terms of coordination and resource allocation. On the other hand central planning cannot oversee everything and decentralisation is therefore a necessity. Selznick outlines some ‘minimum essentials’ necessary for decentralisation.
First the responsible agency in the area of operation is permitted the freedom to make significant decisions on its own account (the decision argument). Second, there must be active participation by people themselves in the programmes of the public enterprise (the motivation argument). Third, the decentralised organisation needs to establish cooperation with other local institutions in order to be successful (the coordination argument) (Selznick 1949: 28-29).

In addition to these ‘minimum essentials’ Selznick finds that what he calls ‘informal organisation’ plays a significant role in the development of the organisation. I.e. the decentralised organisation has to develop informal, local alliances and, thereby, secure its independence from central authorities. By creating a life of its own, the decentralised organisation is able to not only stay independent but also change strategy with support from local as well as national institutions.

Using Selznick’s analysis as a point of departure we are able to see decentralisation as a much more complex process. Here we are beyond the dichotomy and from this it can be concluded that the question of centralisation decentralisation is not a question of a zero-sum game placed somewhere on a continuum: Centralisation decentralisation is not a dichotomy, both elements are aspects of the same managerial and organisational process.

With the introduction of the informal organisation, the actor’s lifeworld becomes important to the study of organisations and the discussion of decentralisation becomes considerably more nuanced once the one-dimensional dichotomy is rejected. If we see the actors and their lifeworld as the focal point for our analyses we may consider decentralisation part of the decentralised organisations relation’s to the outside world. The relation to the HQ then becomes a very important relation but still a relation that has to be negotiated and interpreted by the actors involved. Another concern is the systems established between the decentralised organisation and the HQ and then again how these systems function and how they help shaping the lifeworld of the actors involved. From this perspective the centralisation decentralisation debate then becomes a debate about the actors’ interpretation of the decentralisation process, about the systems they use, and about the actions they take, rather than a discussion about structures and contingencies.

The Bank

The Bank itself associates its success with the management’s bold decision to decentralise. Talking to branch managers they all emphasise their newly won freedom to decide on matters that were previously HQ areas. For example they like the fact that they are now able to adjust their marketing efforts to suit the local market. According to the managers this strong focus on local needs has increased turnover and diminished costs as they now can target their marketing efforts in a much more cost-effective manner. They also emphasise their newly won freedom to decide for themselves in the area of human resources, i.e. they are able to hire the staff they need and want. What only a few of them mentioned though, were the centralisation efforts made simultaneously with the decentralisation process. All IT-systems e.g. had been centralised in a very troublesome and complicated process as well as all processes known as production (Jørgensen 2007). However, the few branch managers who did mention the centralisation of IT and production only saw this as a great advantage to them, as they now felt free to concentrate on customers and staff; i.e. they could
concentrate on being managers, not technicians. The elements of control inherent in the centralised systems were not regarded as a problem, as they themselves had been involved in the process of determining the goals of their own branch. This rather rosy image of the process could be accused of hiding the essential elements of control, but no matter how hard the interviewers tried to confront this topic, they were only met with a smile and the following remark: “this is not a problem”.

**History**

To explain the development in the Bank one may find a lot of interesting clues in the past. The history of The Bank might point to the reason for the present success; first because success has not always been part of the vocabulary of The Bank and also because decentralisation is not necessarily a new thing in The Bank. The Bank was born decentralised in the sixties and the seventies. Through the eighties the Bank established itself as the regional bank. Through numerous mergers with small, local savings banks it gradually grew in size and the outward appearance was a bank; i.e. a unified organisation with a hierarchical structure, with strategies decided by HQ and with all the systems needed to run a large bank. This was, however, not necessarily the case. The local branches, which in most cases were the local savings banks, continued as always and it seemed that only the signs on the wall outside the bank and the logo had changed. The branches were very independent and they still held on to the strategy of the savings banks, with a strong local customer base in the agricultural communities and in fishery. Simultaneously the banks’ systems were very diverse and were not able to function together in any coordinated way. This meant that employees had to type in the same data several times when granting e.g. a simple loan. Information about customers could not be drawn from a central database as such a thing did not exist. The independence also meant that the HQ could not, or would not, exercise any kind of authority concerning the policies of the branches (Henriksen 1992). This meant that any conflict between branches, e.g. about customers, could not be solved by interference from the HQ. This also meant that the HQ had reduced itself to a kind of marketing department with some elements of service concerning international banking and some control functions. Strategy, it-systems, HR or any other central function one could normally expect from a central business unit was non-existent. This of course caused considerable frustration in the HQ and in the mid-eighties the newly appointed management felt that something had to be done in order to make a more unified organisation. The answer to this was the value project (Jørgensen 2007 cap. 6). The value project was a very ambitious project that was intended to create new and unified values across The Bank and its many branches. It was, however, a very ambiguous project and it was open to many different interpretations. The ambiguity and the fact that many bankers saw the value project as a very strange creature to have in a bank created the exact opposite of the intended. The ambiguity made it possible for each branch manager to make his own interpretation and the independence and the local autonomy grew even bigger. The value project consisted of a number of seminars and some vague ideas about shared values. The project never addressed any real problems as these problems were experienced in the branches. Therefore it never made any real impact on the branch offices and it was not able to help the
employees in the everyday life of the bank. The value project seemed to simply peter out. Today it is practically forgotten, or at least neglected very consciously. Because of its impotence the value project was soon replaced by the technology project which turned out to be a completely different beast. The technology project was a hardcore technology project. On the surface the technology project was about IT systems and the production of products and services in the bank. The problems which the employees faced concerning different IT systems were solved through heavy investments in new technology, so the people in The Bank were no longer forced to use different IT systems in every bank transaction. But it was much more than that. It also marked a change in division of labour between employees in the branches and it was a project that was centralising power in the HQ. The division of labour meant that all employees were assigned to be either sales persons, backup persons or managers. The centralisation that followed the new IT systems meant also a new division of labour between the HQ and the branch offices. Now the HQ launched large marketing campaigns and the branches had to follow suit, the same for IT and HR. From an organisation theory point of view we would probably call this a centralisation exercise and the change in the division of labour could even be called a taylorisation of working conditions; from a situation where every employee handled every aspect of the working process – from sales work and counselling of clients to the final paperwork, to the new situation where the work was divided and different people were made responsible for different parts of the process. Normally, organisation scholars would find this somewhat dangerous as taylorisation and centralisation are expected to cause unrest and problems among employees. But not in this case. The new IT systems was long awaited, as everyone could see that the old systems did not work and the new work procedures were looked upon with great relief, as the employees now knew what to do after the very ambiguous and somewhat confusing messages of the value project. The technology project also meant that the HQ finally could exercise some kind of central management. It was now possible to make a central strategy, with centrally decided campaigns and centrally-produced products. The technology project was not easily implemented – due to technical problems and mistrust caused by the previous unsuccessful projects, but after some initial difficulties the technology project was finally implemented. The new systems and the new possibilities for central action solved some problems for The Bank. The technical problems were solved with a more up-to-date IT system and a centralised production. Also the possibility to act as a unified company and not as a series of independent branch offices was welcomed by most employees. But the technology project also caused problems. While the strategy with independent branch offices lacked coordination, the new strategy lacked diversity. The centrally organised marketing campaigns were maybe not suited for everyone and this points to a problem that became more and more obvious. The new centralised strategy meant that the Bank could now be regarded a large bank, but without the muscle of a large bank. This was a dilemma. Therefore, a new strategy was devised. Instead of being a small, ‘large bank’ caught in the middle, the management decided that the Bank should be a middle sized bank with all the advantages of a large bank and all the advantages of a local bank as well. This strategy was launched in 2001. The new strategy was called a decentralisation process; it was about setting the local managers free to exploit the opportunities in their local area while, at the
same time, using the central systems to back up the local initiatives. Things like marketing, HR and product portfolio were up to the local manager to handle according to his or her own preferences. The Bank would then supply the support to these local initiatives. Marketing campaigns, training programmes, further education and career planning to employees, more complicated bank transactions like foreign exchange, stocks and bonds would still be handled centrally, but the local managers were to decide which services they needed. The new strategy was followed by a new accounting system, based on a profit centre principle, where the branches only pays for the services they order. The new strategy was an expansion strategy as well, where the Bank opened branch offices outside the region and several new branches have been established outside the region.

The marketing department ran a large campaign to attract new branch managers – preferably local bankers – under the motto “get your own bank”. It all looked like a combination of the old times local savings banks with a strong local backing and a kind of McDonald franchise, where The Bank provided offices, banking systems, logos etc., and the local managers were expected to develop their own local strategy.

So far this strategy has proven very successful. In 2006 The Bank presented its largest profit ever and turnover had increased as well.

**Analysis - The Branch manager**

The new strategy was and is successful in every respect. People in the HQ are very satisfied with the results. The branch managers are delighted, as we shall see below, and even people in the central marketing and HR functions are happy about the new arrangements. Instead of making large campaigns to everybody, campaigns that no one really cared about, marketing and HR can now tailor suit campaigns to the wishes of the branch managers.

But is this decentralisation? It is, because of the freedom the branch managers are offered, and it is not, because the branches still have to use The Bank’s systems and the branch managers still have to live up to certain performance targets which in the end are set by the HQ. It is decentralisation because it fulfils the minimum essentials that Selznick required of a decentralisation process: The branch managers can make their own decisions, they are highly motivated and the systems of The Bank secure a coordinated effort from all parties involved.

So, this leaves us with an interesting question – how would all this function in the everyday life of a branch manager? How would a branch manager conceptualise his newly won freedom and how would he conceptualise the idea of being part of a larger organisation that provides him with systems and services, but also with demands and performance targets? This is the task for the following analysis to find out. Our analysis of the branch manager’s conception of the decentralisation project is based on the conceptualising method (Henriksen et. al. 2004).

**Conceptualising centralisation and decentralisation**
An interview was carried out with a 36-year-old Bank branch manager\(^1\) - let’s call him Anders. Anders started his career as a trainee in The Bank and has worked his way up the internal career ladder. Apart from a one-year appointment in another large bank chain, Anders has been with The Bank all his professional life and is now residing as branch manager in the local branch in his hometown.

**Analysis of interview data**

**First analysis: Anders on ‘being independent and dependent’**

The first stage in the analysis of the interview data, involved a repeated reading of the transcribed interview to identify passages in the text where Anders tries to conceptualise his relationship with The Bank here approx 5 years after the launch of the decentralisation strategy. The readings opened up to an interesting observation; namely that Anders, in spite of his newly won independence and his ability to do it ‘his way’ (due to the new decentralisation strategy), effortlessly acts out the roles of both an independent branch manager and a dedicated employee who remains loyal to the HQ’s strategies and values. In the following we shall comment on the way Anders addresses these issues in the interview, as he speaks enthusiastically about the value of being independent (the decentralisation strategy) while at the same time emphasising the importance of being able to identify with the company as a whole (The Bank as a centralised unit).

**Anders on ‘being independent’**

Throughout the interview Anders speaks very positively about his independence and the benefits of the decentralisation strategy. There is now doubt that the strategy appeals to Anders personally, “I love it, I feel like a fish in the water” as he puts it in one of the quotes below. Anders sees the decentralisation process as a welcoming change in The Bank and emphasises in particular how the strategy has given him the power to run the branch ‘his way’, to make his own decisions and take action when it comes to the daily running of his Bank branch.

> “Previously The Bank employed an inside-out strategy – now it is an outside-in strategy and I love it, I feel like a fish in the water” (p. 2)

> “Previously the HQ told us what to do, today it is much more up to us out here…” (p. 2 )

> “I was a bit reluctant […] did it [the strategy] actually work out here [at branch level], but I must say yes it does” (p. 2)

\(^1\) The interview was carried out by two researchers from Aalborg University (one being one of the authors of this paper) in November 2006, recorded on the spot, and later transcribed and turned into a written document for further analysis.
“...of course we are part of a chain, with the advantages this gives us such as large purchases, and compared to a supermarket we have a number of functions which we may draw on in The Headquarters such as HR functions, but it is me who decides how I want to run my business” (p. 2-3)

“... they [HQ] offer us a range of products [e.g. loyalty account, housing finance programmes]...[...] but it is me who says “ok let’s run this campaign” if this is what we choose to do” (p. 13)

Speaking of power, the decentralisation process also seems to have boosted Anders’ self-esteem and nourished qualities in him which one tends to associate with an independent person. It is almost as if the ‘carte blanche’ from The Bank to go out and make your own bank has created a strong sense of empowerment in him and a feeling of being able to ‘do it all’. He presents himself as a strong-minded, result-oriented branch manager who is ‘ambitious’, ‘determined as hell’, *the local branch manger*, and who ‘goes for it’, and ‘can do it all’.

It may not be apparent from the quotes below but the immediate context in which Anders’ independence is most present is usually when it comes to talking about the running of the branch – more specifically operations management, products, marketing, customer care, etc. What is perhaps even more interesting is the fact that when talking about HQ in his ‘independence discourse’ Anders conceptualises a rather distanced and casual relationship with HQ regarding it as a business partner or resource which he may – or may not – choose to draw on.

“I’m ambitious like hell, when I have set my mind on something, I really go for it” (p. 21)

“I know they [HQ] are here when I need them, but I don’t” (p. 22)

“I feel that I might just as well be placed in an independent savings bank. It's great” (p. 22)

“I can do it all. This is something the customer likes ... they [customers] love when I participate in a meeting with them – I’m determined as hell. My customers love that – when I participate in a meeting they know they’ve got the money when they walk out of the door” (p. 22)

“So in this town there is no doubt, I am the local bank manager” (p. 22)

The interview clearly shows that Anders is indeed a very independent person and judging from the statements above, one is tempted to conclude that his relationship with The Bank has developed into a business partnership rather than a ‘subsidiary’. I.e. if HQ offers a good product, Anders may consider buying it, but *only* if he thinks it will suit his local branch and the local community. This
conception, however, could not be more wrong. There are many instances in the text where Anders shows a strong sense of belonging and attachment to the Bank. This is particularly apparent when the talk falls on corporate culture and corporate values.

**Anders on ‘being dependent’**

In this section we shall consider the way Anders conceptualises his dependence and loyalty to The Bank.

One of the interesting linguistic features which immediately springs to mind is Anders’ conceptualisation of The Bank as ‘family’ and ‘home’. His choice of metaphor (Bank is Family/Home) allows him to describe and assign all the positive attributes to The Bank which we usually associated with family or home.

“We [The Bank] have gone from being a family culture to a sales culture. So it is a different company, but we are not quite a sales culture yet. There is still a measure of ‘family’ involved. But I feel it - when I say “it’s like coming home”. Of course I have come home to my family both me and my wife are here from The Town, so we have come home again to the family, come home to our hometown, The Town, which we, like so many others, love, but I also feel that I have returned to my childhood, that I have come home, so when I say “I have come home” it involves many different dimensions” (p.2)

“[contrary to The Other Bank], we [The Bank] still contain elements of the family culture - we work things out” (p. 10)

“I can do it [maintain The Bank values and corporate culture], after all I’m The Bank boy” (p. 17)

These metaphors are quite interesting from the point of view of explaining why Anders, in spite of his positive attitude towards independence, is able to, as we also shall see in the analysis of ‘we’, identify heavily with The Bank and transfer The Bank values to his ‘own’ branch. The quotes above indicate a strong sense of belonging, enculturation and a shared notion of "how we do things around here", a feeling which is probably the result of Anders being employed by The Bank almost all his professional life, and which, in spite of the decentralisation strategy, still leads Anders to describe himself as a ‘Bank boy’ as ‘coming home’ (after a one-year-appointment in The Other Bank) and consider the bank ‘family’.

Talking about the new strategy and the values associated with The Bank, Anders’ explicitly says that he and the employees in his branch easily identify with and take on as their own the corporate values and corporate behaviour of The Bank:
“you see the new values [ambitious, down-to-earth, actively involved – The Bank’s own translation] this is exactly us here in The Town, they are tailor-made to us! (p. 4)

“It was a happy surprise to see that we [the branch manager and the employees] viewed the values in the same way. They fit us perfectly. One should think they [The Bank] had tailor-made them to The Town]” (p. 5).

Being able to identify with the values and behaviour of his workplace, is in fact extremely important to Anders. This is apparent when he at some point in the interview, says that a mismatch between his values and the corporate values of his former employer lead to a lack of identification with the job:

“This is part of what I realised [as an employee] in The Other Bank. There wasn’t an identity match” (p. 10)

“I really didn’t identify with the job and the values and behaviour of The Other Bank” (p. 2)

Judging from the quotes above, it is a possible conclusion that Anders finds his relationship and living up to the values of The Bank unproblematic – simply because there is a clear match between his personal values and ways of doing business and the values and corporate behaviour of The Bank – decentralisation strategy or not. This ‘identity match’ might very well be due to the fact that Anders has been with The Bank for most of his professional life, as suggested by the following statement:

“...but if you [new branch manager] come to The Bank from the ‘outside’ [formerly employed in a competing bank], how do you then become part of the community?” (p. 17).

In the above extract Anders seems to suggest that in spite of their independence, the new branch managers – especially the ‘outsiders’ coming from other banks – may find it difficult to become full members of The Bank community. One is, therefore, tempted to conclude that Anders suggests that in order for The Bank decentralisation strategy to work, while also keeping a significant measure of a community feeling intact in relation to The Bank, branch managers should ideally regard The Bank as family. As Anders says: “I can do it [maintain The Bank values and corporate culture], after all I’m The Bank boy”.

Summary first analysis
As the first analysis showed, close readings of Anders’ conceptualisation of himself and his relationship with The Bank indicated that Anders’ affiliation with The Bank is characterised by an equal measure of centralisation/dependence and decentralisation/independence – where, it appeared that centralisation/dependence was related to ‘soft’ factors such as corporate culture, corporate
values and belief systems whereas decentralisation/independence concerns more ‘tangible’ measures such as the local operations management and bottom-line results. This confirms the minimum essentials; local decision-making, motivation and central coordination, as suggested by Selznick.

In the second analysis, we shall take Anders’ relationship with The Bank a step further and consider the way he uses personal pronouns to place himself in relation to the rest of The Bank.

**Second analysis: Anders’ construction of ‘we’-communities**

In a process of decentralisation it is quite likely that a transformation of belongingness and a sharper demarcation of ‘I’ versus ‘we’, or ‘us’ versus ‘them’ may take place. The use of the first person plural pronoun ‘we’ is an important indicator of how a speaker represents and construct groups and communities and positions himself in relation to others (see for example Pennycook 1994; Fortanet 2003; Inigo-Mora 2004; Fairclough 2000 & 2003). The first readings of the interview with Anders indicated an extraordinary use of the pronoun ‘we’ – taking the decentralisation strategy and The Bank’s ‘creating our own bank’ motto into account. Nonetheless, it seemed that Anders was able to effortless switch between many different ‘we-communities’; communities which obviously were related due to their relation with The Bank but which – due to the decentralisation strategy – could also be said to stand in opposition to each other.

Thus taking a closer look at the linguistic construction of communities and sense of belonging in the text, we decided to consider the way the personal pronoun ‘we’ was put to use in the interview.

**Method**

Using the same interview with Anders as commented on above; we transformed the interview into a corpus of 10422 words – deleting questions and comments from the interviewers focusing solely on Anders’ statements. The aim of the analysis was to establish the frequency, referent and discourse function of the pronoun ‘we’ in the interview. To establish the frequency, we used the corpus linguistics tool, Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1996). However, to establish the referents and the discourse functions of ‘we’, the application of Wordsmith Tools was not of much use. Therefore, a thorough, qualitative analysis was made – which required careful readings of all the 285 instances of ‘we’ pointed to in the concordance display. To double-check, the readings were performed twice – in most cases with continual cross-reference to the original interview to solve ambiguities and avoid incorrect categorisation.

A search using the Wordsmith Tools Concordance produced 285 occurrences of the pronoun ‘we’ – with a frequency of 27 ‘we pronouns’ per 1000 words (2.7%) in the text. Unfortunately, there are no comparable texts available (such as interviews with other branch managers) so we cannot tell whether the occurrence of ‘we’ is unusually high or pretty much standard for this type of genre.

The qualitative analysis of referents and discourse functions, however, confirmed our first impression: Anders did indeed identify with at least three, significant, internal ‘Bank communities’
which others may see as standing in opposition to each other, due to the decentralisation process, but which Anders so eloquently manages to jump in and out of:

**We = Anders as a member of the corporate Bank community ‘The Bank’**

**We = Anders as a member of his local Bank branch community**

**We = Anders as a member of the local branch managers’ community**

The three communities listed above accounted for the most frequent ‘single group reference’ of ‘we’ in the text namely: 18% = Bank community, 38% = local Bank branch community and 28% = branch managers’ community. This leaves out 16% of the ‘we pronouns’. These 16% will not be considered in detail here as they refer to miscellaneous categories of communities of a very small number, e.g. Anders and his former colleagues in another bank, Anders and his family, Anders and his colleagues from an internal management course, ‘we’ with a meta-discourse function (used to refer internally to the speech event or some type of reported speech), and one example where ‘we’ cannot be classified because Anders interrupts his own discourse (see also figure 1 below):

![Figure 1: Examples of ‘we-communities’ present in the interview](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Referent</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Discourse context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>Anders as a member of the corporate Bank community ‘The Bank’</td>
<td>51 pronouns</td>
<td>Refers to characteristics/attributes/actions of The Bank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**We = Anders as a member of the corporate Bank community ‘The Bank’**
There are 51 occurrences of the pronoun ‘we’ which refer to the corporate community/HQ of The Bank. Thus in spite of Anders having his ‘own’ local Bank branch, his statements indicate a strong identification with the Bank as a whole. ‘We’ – referring to The Bank – appears frequently in clauses with attributive verbs such as ‘have’ and ‘are’ and are used to describe the characteristics and main attributes of The Bank to the interviewer.

“We are the Xth largest bank in Denmark”

“We have a fantastic product”

“Now we are starting to get more and more branch managers around the country”

When talking about The Bank community, Anders also associates ‘we’ with a range of actions:

“And we couldn’t beat the small banks”

“We combine the best of two worlds”

“We had to make a radical change”

‘We’ is also used in statements which serve to explain to the interviewer the special Bank jargon and, thereby, also Anders’ insider role/knowledge:

“Yes, they are sales people, we call them advisers”

In all the statements above, Anders could have chosen to use the proper noun ‘The Bank’ instead of ‘we’. The effect, however, of using ‘we’ instead of ‘The Bank’ is of course that Anders indicates to the interviewer that he identifies strongly with the Bank and considers himself a full member of The Bank community – associating himself with the actions and attributes of The Bank.

**We = Anders as a member of his local Bank branch community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Referent</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Discourse context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>Anders’ Bank branch</td>
<td>109 pronouns 38% of the total number of pronouns</td>
<td>Refers to characteristics/attributes/actions of The Bank branch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned above, Anders is the branch manager of his ‘own’ bank. However, managing his ‘own’ bank is not something which Anders turns into an individual thing. In fact when the interviewer asks Anders who he means when he says ‘we’, Anders replies:
“When I think about my local branch, I very much think ‘we’. I don’t need to be in the leading position. I’m more comfortable with the idea that it is the team that is successful” (p. 7)

This is probably the reason why 38% of the total amount of ‘we’s in the text refer to Anders and his Bank branch.
The discourse context of the ‘bank branch-we’ is often one of defining and describing the branch in relation to The Bank:

“Of course we are part of a chain with the advantages....”

“*We* have a number of functions which *we* may draw on in HQ”

There are also a significant amount of recounts - recounting past events in the branch – typically concerned with the ‘strategic’ event when the Bank introduced its new values:

“*We* went to this event in X town”

“There was this value game which *we* bought”

‘*We*’ is also associated with a range of actions which the branch has taken on as a result of standing on its own feet and being able to decide what to do – independently of The Bank:

“*We* have made this 3-year plan”

“Now *we* just run a campaign if this is what *we* want”

“This is what the customer feels, *we* have a significant influence”

And, as was the case with The Bank, ‘*we*’ (the branch) also appears in a significant number of attributive clauses, describing what the branch is like:

“*We* have an increasing customer base so we are happy”

“*We* have a fantastic financial situation”

“*We* have a high average age”

“*We* stand much stronger today”

“*We* have been qualified bankers”
Had Anders been a typical individualist focusing on his own achievements as branch manager, he could have chosen to use the pronoun ‘I’ in many of the statements above. The fact that he chooses not to, may indicate that he is indeed a ‘team player’, an expression he also uses himself at some point in the interview.

**We = Anders as a member of local branch managers’ community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Referent</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Discourse context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>Anders as a member of local branch managers’ community (i.e. local branches, local managers, networks of branch managers)</td>
<td>80 pronouns 28% of the total number of pronouns</td>
<td>Refers to characteristics/attributes/ actions of branch managers which primarily set the branches apart from The Bank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several places in the interview Anders uses ‘we’ to refer to the community of bank branch managers. ‘We’ is often used here to signal unity among all the branch managers - not least when it comes to keeping the HQ specialist functions in The Bank at bay. This is particularly striking when Anders refers to the negotiations which take place between HQ and the branch managers when new goods and services are offered to the branches from HQ, which the branches have to pay for:

“But then *we* say, if it is advantageous and if 2/3 says *we* should run housing and price, well then the whole bank will do that”

“*We* think a lot about the price [of the service of The Bank]”

“But of course it is a negotiation whether *we* need the services/offerings [from the HQ]”

“And then they come [HQ] and then *we* are some who cry out loud ‘stop’, how much is it, and then they go crazy”

Apart from referring to the group of branch managers as ‘we’, indicating a strong united front, ‘we’ is also used in the interview to set the group of branch managers apart:

“*We* may look alike – but we are very different in the way we run our branches”

“*We* have adjusted to the locals – this meets the needs they have”

However, towards the end of the interview, Anders suggests that a strong network of branch managers serves as an important tool for establishing and maintaining a kind of commonness
between the branches. Thus talking about the new branch managers and meetings in the network Anders say:

“It is the only way for us [old branch managers] to get them [new branch managers] on our team, get them integrated into The Bank. That is why as from January 2007 we have changed the meeting structure so we meet only once every 3 months – but then for 1 or 2 days”

Summary second analysis
Contrary to what one might expect from a branch manager in a bank with a clear decentralisation strategy, Anders is very much orientated towards three important Bank communities: his own Bank branch community in his local village, his community with other branch managers and The Bank as a whole. The Bank may consider itself decentralised but Anders’ statements indicate a strong orientation towards the whole, as he speaks as a representative and member of all three communities simultaneously.

Although it would have been preferable to include other interviews to compare the findings, the results of this rather detailed linguistic analysis of the personal pronoun ‘we’ and the close readings of the interview to account for Anders’ conceptualisation of dependence and independence, are an interesting indication of the way one branch manager chooses to conceptualise himself and his role in a decentralised bank. A process which he certainly embraces and endorses but which nonetheless has allowed him to continue to represent himself as a member of a number of strong Bank communities – maintaining a clear identification with The Bank.

Conclusion
There is no doubt that the story about the decentralisation of The Bank offers interesting, new perspectives on the centralisation/decentralisation debate. The dichotomy model is not particularly relevant here. Decentralisation in the Bank is not a matter of swinging a pendulum from decentralisation to centralisation and back again. It is a much more complicated process. The description of The Bank and the analyses of the interview with one of its branch managers showed that it is in fact possible to be highly centralised and very decentralised at the same time. And it also seems that The Bank has been highly successful in striking the balance between the two. Not in the sense of finding a balance between two extremes, as one would expect from the dichotomy model, but in the sense that some tasks necessary for doing business in The Bank have been centralised while others have been decentralised. It also seems that in this process The Bank management has been able to get rid of some of the old ghosts haunting The Bank; the lack of coordination and the lack of a unified strategy. However, judging from the interview analysed above the success, is likely to rest upon the ability of The Bank to attract and educate local youth and persuade then to a career in The Bank. In the analyses above we showed how eloquently Anders was able to say ‘we’ about his different Bank communities. As long as The Bank stays in a position where this is possible, the decentralised strategy should be in the best hands and The Bank will not disintegrate. However, should this not be possible, it could be a different story. If the new branch managers, hired from
other banks, are not able to display the same kind of eloquence as Anders, and only want to say ‘we’ about themselves, their own branch and their own career, then there is a strong possibility that the decentralisation strategy will fail. Future research will be carried out and will show if this should be the case.

There are other worries, though. Whereas Selznick advocated local strategies and local informal networking as a means of creating independence in a decentralised organisation, it seems that the branch managers in The Bank are able to do just this, and for that part be very successful in accordance with the overall strategy. The branches are deeply rooted in the local communities. But it seems that the branch managers are able to establish another kind of informal alliance that could threaten or maybe strengthen the strategy – depending on the circumstances. The ‘we’ that constitutes the community of branch managers could form a strong powerbase which in some ways could counterbalance the power of the HQ. This has been expressed as a possible and unwanted scenario by people in The Bank. According to Anders there is nothing to worry about as the branch managers’ ‘we’ is only about exchanging experiences, networking, and providing advice to each other on matters where there is no reason to bother people in the HQ. This can, according to Anders, only be an advantage – instead of a threat - to The Bank.

**Literature**


