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## Languages and Economic Development: 2009 Keynote Address

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When I was first asked to speak today, I really wasn't sure where I'd start. I could start by saying how important it is to be able to express yourself in a different language, or perhaps that languages open doors and widen your horizon to an extent you never thought was possible. Then I realized I would be talking to people who really don't need to be convinced of the importance of languages, so I decided to start my talk with a little about my personal background. When I mention that I am originally from The Netherlands most people say, "You're from Europe, so it's no wonder you speak different languages." Well, I'd like to elaborate a little on how the Dutch came to place such great emphasis on languages and how language teaching works in The Netherlands.

In the second part of my speech, I want to talk more in detail about my present employer, The Georgia Department of Economic Development, and how Georgia places itself in a world that gets smaller and more international every day. I will also talk about my job and how speaking foreign languages helps me in my day-to-day work in economic development.

Let's first talk about The Netherlands. This small nation of 16 million inhabitants in the heart of Western Europe became one of the world's major powers, with a huge colonial empire on all continents. So, how did this small, wet delta stand its ground despite being in the crossroads of other major maritime and continental powers? The answer is: by being practical. Without going into too much detail about the history of The Netherlands, or we would still be here tomorrow, one can say that the geographical location of The Netherlands exposed the country to the rest of the world, whether it liked it or not. But it also created immense possibilities. From the very earliest times, the Dutch looked elsewhere for ways to optimize prosperity and financial gain.

The Dutch quickly realized that they needed free trade. And they also realized that the most crucial ingredient in a thriving economy is tolerance. Back in the sixteenth century, The Netherlands was a nation of immigrants, a safe haven for people prosecuted for their ethnic or religious beliefs from all over Europe. The Netherlands brought together talented craftsmen, scientists, and artists thereby

creating the momentum for the rise of the Dutch colonial empire. During the sixteenth century, Amsterdam was truly the center of the world, and many different languages were spoken there. Why the rulers of that time let things be is very simple: they didn't care. Religion was then and still remains a very personal matter in The Netherlands, and the society is still very individualistic.

One of the many colonies the Dutch established was called New Netherland, with its capital New Amsterdam, nowadays known as New York. The Dutch exported their tradition of tolerance from Old Amsterdam to New Amsterdam. Quickly the word spread across the globe and the outpost filled with people of all trades and backgrounds. The city that was in name Dutch was in fact a melting pot of all cultures and ethnicities thinkable. The main language was Dutch, but also widely spoken were German, English, Swedish, French, Yiddish, Finnish, and Polish, just to name a few. Tolerance was not in itself a goal; it was merely a means of achieving the real goal, which was free trade. And the same can be said about the languages spoken. The Dutch spoke different languages as a tool to help develop their colonies and better their own status.

Meanwhile, New York City changed hands, became English, and subsequently American. But in a way, not much has changed. It still is that dynamic city, the financial and commercial capital of the world. And it still breathes the international atmosphere that is created by people from all over the world in a place where they can live their lives, regardless of their language, ethnic background, or culture. Nevertheless, the Dutch left a mark on the city with places like Flushing, Brooklyn, and Coney Island that were once called Vlissingen, Breukelen, and Coneyn Eylandt, just to name a few.

New York is just one example of how the Dutch administered a colony. The Netherlands was a major colonial empire, along with England, France, Spain, and Portugal. However, this fact is not reflected by the number of people that nowadays speak Dutch. While there are almost 300 million people in the world today who speak Portuguese, there are roughly only 25 million Dutch speakers, mainly in The Netherlands and Belgium. Why is there such a discrepancy in the numbers? Again, as I said earlier, the Dutch didn't care. They never colonized with the purpose of expanding a culture or a language. They wanted trade, and that goal prompted them to be practical. Language served as a tool and a means. I am not telling you all this information as part of a public relations campaign on the glory of the colonial history of The Netherlands. I simply want to explain the nature of the Dutch vis-à-vis languages, back then and now. The point is that every European country has its own unique cultural and historic background. I do think smaller countries are more inclined to teach other languages, but that reason alone is not enough to explain why and how they teach different languages.

Languages are still considered to be incredibly important in the Dutch educational system today. Just like in the seventeenth century, the Dutch still need to know other languages in order to stand our ground in this world. Dutch and English are obligatory throughout elementary school and high school, which typically ends when a student is about 18 years old. Even in college, many subjects are taught in English. The Netherlands is a country that is traditionally still very much focused on the UK and the USA, and consequently many television programs are broadcast in English. And unlike other European countries, shows are not translated but subtitled. These broadcasts and subtitles greatly help children to understand English. In addition to English, a minimum of two years of German and French are taught, and most students study one or both languages throughout high school. Many schools in The Netherlands now also offer Arabic, Turkish, Russian, and Spanish. All these choices mean that Dutch children have at least some basic knowledge in several languages. In Europe, along with the Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes, the Dutch are ranked highest in terms of the number of languages spoken.

Now let's talk about how all these points relate to economic development and, therefore, back to Georgia. As I said before, I work with the Georgia Department of Economic Development. This group of roughly 250 people works to promote Georgia in different areas. Our headquarters are right here in Atlanta, and we have 10 regional representations elsewhere in the State. In addition, we have 10 international offices in Toronto, Mexico City, Santiago de Chile, Munich, London, Jerusalem, Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing. Our department covers all aspects of economic development. We have a trade department that helps Georgian companies to export their products; we have a tourism department to put Georgia on the map of people throughout the world; we have a film and entertainment department that offers Georgia as a location for films and TV shows; and we also develop all Georgia marketing campaigns and materials. Georgia is a global player. We organize trade missions and we visit trade fairs. We are always looking for leads because we must. There is fierce competition among the states in the southeastern region. In Georgia we need to do what we can to market ourselves in order to remain competitive, including focusing on speaking different languages.

At the Georgia Department of Economic Development, we employ several people who speak different languages, including German, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Greek, Polish, Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese. The languages that are most important in my job are definitely German and French. While we realize that English is the world's main language for conducting business, there is no doubt that if you want to close the deal, being able to interact in other languages makes a crucial difference in economic development.

I work in the department that seeks to attract foreign direct investments to Georgia. My job as International Business Concierge was created by Governor Perdue. My department helps foreign managers and executives with their transition when they want to move to Georgia. These managers and executives bring jobs here and we want them to feel welcome. We want them to stay here and spread the word back in their home countries that Georgia is the place to be. The State of Georgia hired me because of my ability to speak different languages, the fact that I went through the process of moving to Georgia, and also because of my previous experience in economic development. The funny thing is that economic development is pretty much the same anywhere on the planet: it is all about relationships.

When I worked in The Netherlands, I was the Dutch government country specialist for Russia and Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan. My job was to assist companies in their efforts to enter the Russian and Kazakhstani markets. I needed to stay aware of the ever-changing circumstances in these countries as well as commercial opportunities. Traveling to these countries and visiting active companies was instrumental in doing my job successfully. My employer recognized that I needed to be able to communicate in these places and offered to pay for Russian lessons. I had a private tutor from Kyrgyzstan to teach me Russian. This rule applied to other languages as well; there were small classes of Spanish, Chinese, Polish, French, and Portuguese. And when in Russia, being able to speak their language really opens doors. My Russian is certainly not fluent, but even speaking basic Russian makes a Russian open up to you right away. You will earn his trust and respect and you will see how warm and welcoming Russians really are. And in Russia, you do business at the dinner table, sharing laughs and enjoying many vodka toasts and *na zdarovyas*.

I have been in my present position for a year now, and it has been an incredible experience. Moving to a different country is never easy, and Georgia is no exception. But there are definitely some issues that people need to overcome. One of the main problems is for people to establish credit. It is a rather complicated procedure, and it really helps to be able to explain it in German, for example. Individuals' comfort levels increase if you can conduct meetings in their mother tongue.

In my job, I use my ability to speak different languages every day, mainly with my international clients. But I have a spider-in-the-web role, interacting with several parties like the 40 bi-national chambers and 60 diplomatic representations, local communities, commercial service providers, and other stakeholders. I try to make connections so that people get the realtor who speaks Japanese, the tax attorney who understands how the Danish tax system works, and an immigration attorney with experience with helping Chinese clients. Another very important

aspect is to explain cross cultural differences . . . not only to foreigners, but also in local communities in Georgia. Languages help make cultural barriers smaller.

So, what other roles do languages play a role in economic development? As I said before, economic development is all about relationships and gaining someone's trust and respect. When you are on a business trip in Austria, an executive may not have intended to invite you for a dinner at his house. However, after hearing you speak German, he may end up doing so, and that is where you close a deal. There are numerous examples where you would have an advantage simply because you can speak in someone's own language. Bear in mind that if you work with international project managers in the US, they may have been sent to the US because they speak English, but the actual CEO or president of the company may not. When you are in a meeting, it is very respectful and simply more practical to your prospects to conduct the meeting in their native language. We also make many presentations to inform prospects or incoming delegations, and we always try to do these in their own national languages. There is no better way to increase individuals' comfort levels or convey their culture than in their own language.

To conclude, I consider speaking one or more languages as something functional. To me, learning a language should never be the goal itself but a means or a tool to achieve something else, whether to understand the deeper meaning of certain literature or work in economic development.