

Response to Microsoft's clarifications that appeared on The Hindu, October 14th, 2007.

Tue, Oct 16, 2007 at 1:00 PM

(Letter written to 'The Hindu')

In its response, Microsoft has given a totally misleading clarification that puts up a generalized excuse rather than deal with the specifics. When the Microsoft's Director of Corporate Communication mentions that they collaborate with State Government bodies and nodal IT agencies to create local language interfaces, he does not specify which bodies they have worked with. They haven't even clarified whether these bodies had any expertise whatsoever with respect to the language.

The DCC further mentions that feedback was received "as is normal with any initiative" when working on Kannada Language Interface Pack and adds "all that has been incorporated". But interestingly, a thread on Microsoft's Bhasha India Forum discussing the inaccuracies, shortcomings and mistakes was removed hastily.

Microsoft Developer Micheal Kaplan's blog on MSDN Blogs (Microsoft Developer Network) announcing the Kannada Language Interface pack has long attracted numerous comments on the shabby state of Kannada LIP (URL: <http://blogs.msdn.com/michkap/archive/2006/03/16/552695.aspx>). Micheal Kaplan's reply to the feedback and complaints was just this: "The feedback program is closed for suggestions at this point". Further, there have been no detail whatsoever provided on what feedback Microsoft actually received.

The Kannada Language interface pack for one is full of inaccuracies. For instance, "Estimated time left" has been translated to "eDakke samaya andaju". For Kannada speaking people this makes a hilarious read. LIP is full of such erratic translations. Translations have not been done in context. The level of translations seem to suggest that Microsoft has totally ignored the feedback and neglected on quality.

Also, on our campaign we're opposing government's choice of Microsoft platform. Whether the platform is Open or Closed is of utmost relevance since the programs/applications are run on it. Microsoft itself claims that it is irrelevant for the "most part" whether the platform is open source or proprietary and thereby admits that it is relevant for some part, and that part, we believe is very important. Especially on projects where sensitive data is stored on those platforms. Spyware, Viruses and Worms have pounded Microsoft's Operating Systems for a long time now. Government data would be under security threat if they do not further invest on programs that improve security on Microsoft's platforms.

Microsoft's latest Operating System comes with DRM, the controversial Digital Rights Management which virtually spies on the users. Surely, the government wouldn't want its data being spied by an MNC from another nation?

As per the letter of intent, Microsoft is providing consultants, tools and the platform. Providing platform is synonymous to ensuring life long dependency to the company providing it. Data migration, migration of software to other platforms, standards is complex and expensive. Most Microsoft tools are platform dependent and most formats they encode data in have been proprietary and their license forbids the formats to be used on other platforms. In India, the government is the largest buyer of software. Microsoft is laying out a trap for the governments by binding them to its platform. Favouring just one proprietary platform could have dangerous consequences.

The Unicode Consortium had released a document as early as 2003 that revealed linguistic details about the Arkavattu issue that has been existing in Microsoft's only Kannada Open Type font - 'Tunga' (a Kannada font shipped only with the latest Microsoft's Operating Systems). Interestingly however, this issue was never solved in Windows XP, and no update has been made available yet. Characters like 'mU' and 'yU' appear disfigured on Tunga font shipped with Microsoft's Windows XP. Microsoft has still not released the corrected version as an update.

Sir, We would like to add further that this campaign is not opposing paperless office system of administration, but instead it is all about creating awareness that better alternatives exist for the government that also serve the interest of the public and the nation. The tax money could then be put to better use rather than pushing it into the mouth of an MNC.

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