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Freeing perspectives with local solutions... Arab Eyes makes a dent

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Mohammed Sameer of Cairo, Egypt -- who'll be 24 in March 2005 -- is actually a graduate from the faculty of pharmacy and has been using Free Software since the late 1999. Today, he's one of the team of ten or so enthusiasts who are working to make computing more relevant to millions using the Arabic script across the globe.

Called 'Arabeyes', the project could benefit a large pool in West Asia. "I suppose (it would potentially benefit) all people using Arabic or Arabic-script languages, in Middle East and the Urdu-speaking people (of South Asia). Then, there are people speaking languages like Pashto too(using a similar script)," says he. "This could be a pool of maybe 400 million people," says he.

As of now, where has Arabeyes reached?

Sameer says it has currently "100% Arabised" Gnome with quality assurance, and has touched about 99% in terms of KDE Arabisation, but has to pass through the quality assurance team team. Open Office1 has been completely translated, and they are now working on Open Office2. Firefox?, translation is there too, and they are waiting for Mozilla's CVS account.

That's regarding translation.

Regarding software, a team-leader called Nadim Shaikli is one of the core team, with the aid of another member, introduced Arabic to Vim. Currently they're re-working on 'Akka' project (which basically a software layer on top of the console so that people can read and write Arabic). Another project is Bicon, which is supposed to replace Akka when completed.

"We are trying to create an Arabic spellchecker, Duali. But it's still not complete," says Sameer.

What does he see as the major tasks sill to be completed?

"We had (taken up work on) a live CD to show Arabic work. The original maintainer isn't free. I took maintainership, but nothing has been completed yet. I have to finalise various projects and we need to complete whatever we're doing. Then, we should try to be more involved with testing various products for Arabic support," says he.

Basically they see themselves as try to fix what's missing.

"I don't think we have much things technically missing. But what I see as really annoying is that we're missing some important standards. For example, we don't have a standard on how to normalise various Arabic letters -- diacritics, the some small marks on the letters. We don't know whether we're supposed to write dots below a letters or not. These are some small things, but they're really annoying," he says with the frankness of a techie eager to do a good job, as against the attitude of a salesman proffering a flawless product.

How did he find the Arabeyes team?

This team was implementing an Arabaic console application called 'Akka'. It uses corba to do a client-server. It was then that he found Arab Eyes. Then, they started working on the QaMoose? Project.

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"It was basically an online dictionary, since we then didn't have an open source dictionary," says Mohammed Sameer. (20A)

"It was a CGI script or Perl with the whole interface, where we could input Arabic and English terms, so it would ease various translations of software," he recalls.

They also feel the need for a standard for sorting.

Their team is just around ten-members strong. (There are over 500 registered users, but approx 10 are very active, on a daily basis.) Could such a small group make such a difference to how so many people do their computing? "Two people, (Free Software Foundation guru) Richard M Stallman and (the father of the Linux kernel) Linus Torvalds could change the life of millions. They were two; we are around ten. If they can do this, I hope we too can achieve something," says he, with cautious optimism.

Asked why the Arab would could simply not take the option of using proprietorial software, Sameer laughs: "That's a religious question," says he. "We're really focussing on open source software."

Sometimes, Free/Libre? and Open Source Software works better. Says he: "We have various GUI tools and text editors that can align writings to the right or left, according to the script used. These use the bidi algorithm."

(*)nix also uses Unicode. This means one can write document which uses multiple languages without any problem.

SOUTH ASIA AND URDU: Sameer says he had been contacted by people from South Asia too, who wanted a solution for the Urdu language that is also written right-to-left. Unfortunately, he says, they lost contact.

Says he: "At Arabeyes, we would like to know the state of Urdu. I think Farsi (from Iran) would also benefit from this work, the Farsi people have been very helpful for the last few years."

What's his tip for those wanting to work in the field of localisation? "They should really understand the language needs, and then, they will start hunting around for what's missing and what's not. And then, I don't knkow.... I'd really be glad to help anyone," he adds.

Sameer has been using computers "since I was in primary school" when his Attari-manufactured computer was used to program Basic. Says he: "My father helped me. He knew this was the thing I loved. I just graduated and worked for the Pharmacy qualification. I don't know anything about it," he adds.

Sameer is one of the admins responsible for the website and various activities of Egypt's user groups. Egypt has two major LUGs, Eglug and Linux-Egypt.

Sameer can be emailed at [msameer at foolab.org](mailto:msameer@foolab.org) or [msameer at eglug.org](mailto:msameer@eglug.org)

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