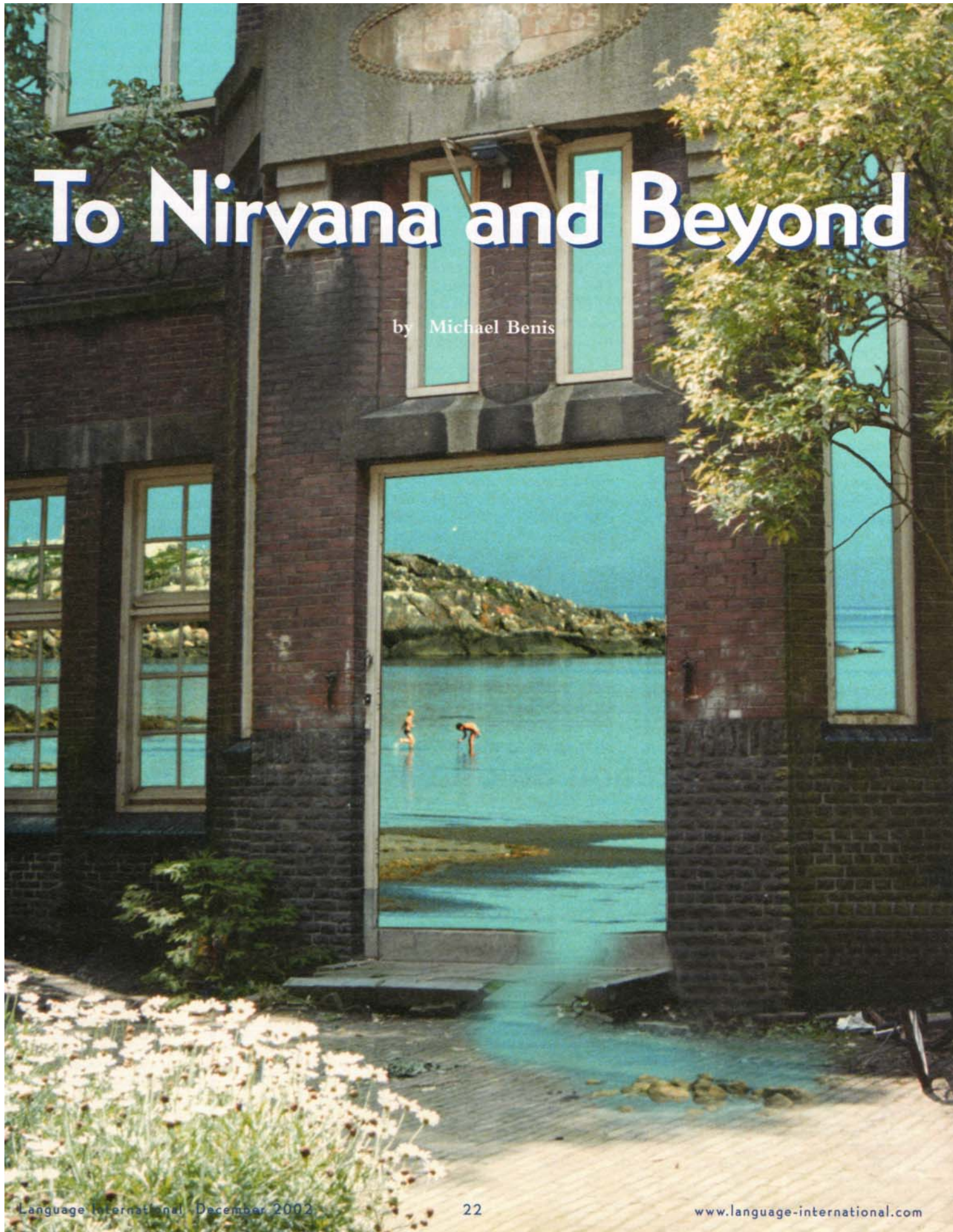


To Nirvana and Beyond

by Michael Benis



Language International has brought us detailed reporting on what will perhaps prove to have been one of the most dramatic periods of change in the history of the language industry, indeed the period during which we first started to talk about a language industry at all. When the first issue came out, it was not long after translators had started moving across to the personal computer and were starting to see their output increase beyond “even” that which had been achievable with sophisticated golf-ball electric typewriters boasting one-line memories.

This accompanied the first boom for translation companies, which saw the increased productivity of established translators accompanied by a sharp rise in demand as internationalisation and globalisation gradually became household words. Glossaries and client databases were still very much a manual business, being limited to ring binders, card files and the then ubiquitous Rolodex.

However, information technology was soon to transform things radically, not only bringing us an altogether new and quite lucrative line of business, but faster and faster processors as well, together with an increasingly resource-hungry horde of software that promised translation Nirvana to us and our clients. Ever since then we’ve been struggling valiantly with translation memory, concordances, project management software, networks, the Internet, e-business and e-procurement in pursuit of the pot at the end of the rainbow of increased consistency, lower costs, instant deadlines, a wider customer base and localisation for effective globalisation. In more ways than one, the language industry had become firmly wedded to industry and technology.

Somewhere in all this, however, I’d venture to suggest that we also lost our way. Just one example that has generated heated discussion in recent years is the whole matter of discounts for the full and fuzzy matches generated by translation memory systems. Rather than selling our use of these tools as a means of achieving increased consistency and more effective quality control (particularly within translation companies) while helping our clients achieve faster times to market, translation memory was generally deployed as a cost-saver to obtain a price-based competitive advantage in a market where translation rates were already falling in real terms. Now, I’m not arguing that there’s any sin in competing on price, but one result of this trend is that the language business—

partly influenced by classic translation theory, which saw quality as rooted almost exclusively in semantic fidelity—gradually became more and more aware of its clients’ bean counters and less attuned to meeting their real needs. We have become fixated with our clients’ “words” and not what they want to achieve with them, be-

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coming cross-language secretaries and not cross-cultural communications consultants. We sell words or even keystrokes and not ideas. Our clients have suffered for this and so has the profession—so much so that it has become commonplace for translators to advertise their skills by stating that their work doesn’t “read like a translation”. At the turn of the millennium, the vicious circle has come round to biting us full on the tail. Expectations of the industry are low. Even some of the most successful translation companies are struggling to survive on today’s dwindling margins. Equally serious, shrinking rates and the high stress of unrealistic deadlines have made it increasingly difficult to attract new talent to the profession.

So what does all this mean? Is the industry in crisis? I think it is, but in the sense that we’re also at a turning point. There is a niche and a big one (if one can have a big niche) that is absolutely desperate to find professionals who will do more than change the language of the words on a

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page and instead work closely with their clients to advise them how a manual may need to be structured very differently to be clear for another culture, how their brand

strategy may need to be totally changed if it is to be effective outside its home country, or how they may need to entirely rethink the message on this year’s Christmas cards if they want their employees in other countries to feel at home in their company.

Interestingly, some of the most successful companies and freelancers in recent years have built their own corporate strategies around doing precisely this. Perhaps they were ahead of their time in educating their clients about these matters instead of the joys of fuzzy matches. Perhaps they were simply lucky in terms of who they approached. There’s no doubt that those companies which have had their fingers burnt tend to grow much more attentive ears.

It’s my guess, however, that this is the direction in which the language industry is slowly moving for the simple reason that it’s what our clients need and that the results will speak for themselves. I’m not saying it’s going to happen overnight. Nor am I saying that we won’t continue to find innovative companies in 20 years time that spend hundreds of pounds on good copywriters, yet still get their marketing material translated by the managing director’s very bright grandson who just achieved amazingly high grades in his school exams. But I do believe that the language industry is finally moving to take its rightful place alongside the other communications industries or, to put it another way, that having started talking to industry we’re now finally starting to talk its language.

In providing a forum to report on and debate these trends, *Language International* has played a valuable role in helping us make that journey.

*Michael Benis
Brighton, December 2002.*

Michael Benis is a freelance communications consultant, copywriter, journalist and translator. Visit www.michaelbenis.com for more information.