Examples and Observations

"When your pet cat comes home and stands at your feet calling *meow*, you are likely to understand this message as relating to that immediate time and place. If you ask your cat where it has been and what it has been up to, you'll probably get the same *meow* response. Animal communication seems to be designed exclusively for this moment, here and now. It cannot effectively be used to relate events that are far removed in time and place. When your dog says *GRRR*, it means *GRRR*, right now, because dogs don't seem to be capable of communicating *GRRR, last night, over in the park*. In contrast, human language users are normally capable of producing messages equivalent to *GRRR, last night, over in the park*, and then going on to say, *In fact, I'll be going back tomorrow for some more*. Humans can refer to past and future time. This property of human language is called **displacement**. . . . Indeed, displacement allows us to talk about things and places (e.g. angels, fairies, Santa Claus, Superman, heaven, hell) whose existence we cannot even be sure of."
(George Yule, *The Study of Language*, 4th ed.

Cambridge University Press, 2010)

A Characteristic of All Human Languages

"Consider the range of things that you can say, such as a sentence like this:

Hey, kids, your mother left last night, but don't worry, she'll be back when she's come to terms with the whole notion of mortality.

(This was said tongue in cheek by a friend, but it's a useful example.) By uttering certain sounds in a given order, the speaker of this sentence is addressing particular individuals (the kids), referring to a particular individual who isn't there (their mother), referring to times that are not the present (last night and whenever the mother comes to terms), and referring to abstract ideas (worry and mortality). Let me point out in particular that the ability to refer to things that are not physically present (objects here, and times) is known as **displacement**. Both displacement and the ability to refer to abstractions are common to all human languages."
(Donna Jo Napoli, *Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions About Language*. Oxford University Press, 2003)

Achieving Displacement

"Different languages accomplish **displacement** in different ways. English has a system of [auxiliary verbs](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-auxiliary-verb-1689150) (e.g., *will, was, were, had*) and [affixes](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-affix-grammar-1689071) (e.g., *pre-* in *predates*; *-ed* in *dated*) to signal when an event occurred relative to the moment of speaking or relative to other events."
(Matthew J. Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics: Understanding Language Science*. Wiley, 2012)

Displacement and the Origins of Language

"Compare these:

There's a mosquito buzzing in my ear.
Nothing is more irritating than a buzzing sound.

In the first, there's a particular buzzing in the here and now. In the second, there may be, but there needn't be--I could say this in reacting to a story about something that happened years ago. In talking about [symbolism](https://www.thoughtco.com/symbolism-definition-1692169) and [words](https://www.thoughtco.com/word-english-language-1692612), people often make far too much of [arbitrariness](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-arbitrariness-language-1689001)--the absence of any relationship between a word's form and its meaning. . . . [W]hen it comes to how language began, **displacement** is a factor far more important than arbitrariness."
(Derek Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue: How Humans Made Language, How Language Made Humans*. Hill and Wang, 2009)

"[M]ental time travel is critical to language. . . . Language . . . may have evolved primarily to enable humans to share their memories, plans, and stories, enhancing social cohension and creating a common culture."
(Michael C. Corballis, *The Recursive Mind: The Origins of Human Language, Thought, and Civilization*. Princeton University Press, 2011)