Semantic Theory
week 11 – Presuppositions

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Back to: Entailment

A sentence A entails a sentence B (A ⊨ B) iff whenever A is true, then B must also be true.

Entailment is a relation between the *propositions* expressed by the two sentences A and B:

(1) *John and Mary failed the test* ⊨ *Mary failed the test*

(2) *John or Mary failed the test* ⊨ *Someone failed the test*

(3) *John is an intelligent student* ⊨ *John is a student*

(4) *Every student works* ⊨ *Every blond student works*

More examples of entailment?

(1) *The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman*

$\models^{?}$ *Someone proved Goldbach's conjecture*

(2) *Mary loves her husband*

$\models^{?}$ *Mary has a husband / is married*

(3) *It was Mary who broke the typewriter*

$\models^{?}$ *Somebody broke the typewriter*

(4) *John kissed every girl at the party*

$\models^{?}$ *There were girls at the party*

(Examples (1), (3) from von Fintel)

Entailment vs. Presupposition

Entailment:

(1) *John and Mary failed the test* ⊨ *Mary failed the test*

(2) *<u>It's not the case that</u> John and Mary failed the test* ⊭ *Mary failed the test*

Presupposition:

(3) *The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman*

» *Someone proved Goldbach's conjecture*

(4) *<u>It's not the case that</u> the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman*

» *Someone proved Goldbach's conjecture*

What are presuppositions?

"A *presupposition* of a statement is a proposition that must be true in order for the statement to be interpretable (to make sense) in the first place."

"A *presupposition* is an implicit assumption about the world whose truth is taken for granted by the speaker."

Back to: definite descriptions

(1) *The chancellor decides*

“there is exactly one chancellor, and (s)he decides”

↦ ∃x(∀y(chancellor’(y) ↔ x = y) ∧ decide’(x))

the chancellor ↦ λG∃x(∀y(chancellor’(y) ↔ x = y) ∧ G(x))

the ↦ λFλG∃x(∀y(F(y) ↔ x = y) ∧ G(x))

Definite descriptions and compositionality

(2) *It is not the case that the chancellor decides*

Compositional analysis of the sentence leads to:

$\neg\exists x(\forall y(\text{chancellor'}(y) \leftrightarrow x = y) \wedge \text{decide'}(x))$

↝ "Either there is no chancellor, or more than one, or there is exactly one chancellor and she doesn't decide."

Correct representation for the sentence:

$\exists x(\forall y(\text{chancellor'}(y) \leftrightarrow x = y) \wedge \neg\text{decides'}(x))$

↝ "There is exactly one chancellor, and she doesn't decide."

Two types of meaning information

A sentence (e.g. one containing a definite description) contains meaning information of (at least) two different types:

Presupposition: the requirements that the context must satisfy for the sentence to be interpretable at all.

Assertion: the claims that are made, based on the context.

(1) *The chancellor decides*

$\exists x(\forall y(\text{chancellor}'(y) \leftrightarrow x=y) \wedge \text{decides}'(x))$

"There is exactly one chancellor, and she decides."

Presuppositions and Negation

(2) *It is not the case that the chancellor decides*

$\exists x(\forall y(\text{chancellor'}(y) \leftrightarrow x=y) \wedge \neg \text{decides'}(x))$

"There is exactly one chancellor, and she doesn't decide."

- Negation only affects the assertion, not the presupposition
- The presupposition is interpreted as if it were introduced outside the scope of the negation; this is called *projection*
- We can use the property of projection to test for presuppositions.

Examples of presupposition triggers (1/3)

[Notation: “A » B” means “A presupposes B”]

Definite descriptions

(1) *(It’s not the case that) the king of France is bald.*
» There is a unique king of France

(2) *Mary loves / doesn’t love her husband*
» Mary has a husband

(3) *(It’s not the case that) Mary’s brother bought a house*
» Mary has a brother

Quantifiers

(4) *John kissed / didn’t kiss every girl at the party*
» There were girls at the party

Examples of presupposition triggers (2/3)

Factive verbs (regret, realise, being aware, …)

(5) *John regrets that Pola is married*
» *Pola is married*

(6) *John realised that he was in debt*
» *John was in debt*

Implicative verbs (manage to, forget to, …)

(7) *John forgot to close the door*
» *John intended to close the door*

(8) *John managed to close the door*
» *John tried to close the door*

Examples of presupposition triggers (3/3)

Aspectual verbs and items

(9) *John has stopped smoking*
» *John used to smoke*

(10) *John opened the window again*
» *The window was open/The window was opened by John before*

It-Clefts

(11) *It was John who ate the cake*
» *Somebody ate the cake*

Sentence particles

(12) *Only John came to the party*
» *John came to the party*

Presupposition Projection

Presuppositions do not only “survive” negation, but also other kinds of embeddings:

(1) *The chancellor decides or the states’ prime ministers decide*

» *There is a (exactly one) chancellor*

(2) *John possibly regrets that Mary is married*

» *Mary is married*

(3) *Mary believes that John has stopped smoking*

» *John used to smoke*

Presupposition Filtering

There are contexts that can “neutralise” or *filter* some presuppositions; they block projection of these presuppositions:

(1) *If John is out of town, then his wife is unhappy*

» *John has a wife / is married*

(2) *If John is married, then his wife is unhappy*

» ~~*John is married*~~

(3) *If John is married, then his daughter is unhappy*

» *John has a daughter*

Presupposition Cancellation

In the context of negation, presuppositions can be overwritten or "cancelled" by explicitly claiming that they are false.

(1) *John doesn't regret that Mary is married. Mary has no husband, and John knows that.*

(2) *It's not the case that the king of France is bald. France is a republic.*

The projection problem:
Under what conditions does a sentence containing a presupposition trigger inherit this presupposition?

→ Presuppositions and compositionality: how to explain the presuppositions of complex sentences in terms of the presuppositions of their parts?

The Russell-Strawson debate

- *The king of France is bald*

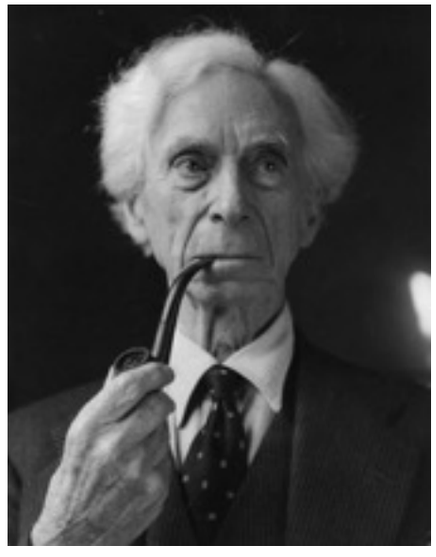
What truth-value should we assign to this sentence?

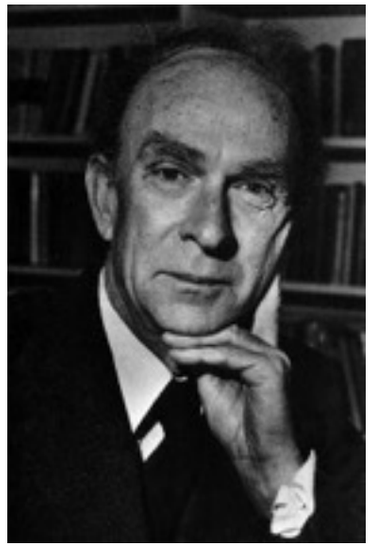
"**False** because there is no king of France"

Russell, B., 1905. "On Denoting," Mind

"**Undefined** because we cannot check whether the statement is true or false"

Strawson, P.F., 1950. "On Referring," Mind





Summary: Presuppositions

- Presuppositions are triggered by a number of different words and linguistic constructions, including definite noun phrases.

- Presuppositions behave differently than assertions in semantics construction: They are typically projected unchanged, rather than used in functional application.

- Projected presuppositions can be filtered in the semantic composition process, and can be cancelled by contextual knowledge.

Presuppositions in DRT

Presupposition Projection as Anaphora Resolution
Rob van der Sandt (1992)

- Presuppositions are anaphora with semantic content.

- Presupposition filtering is modelled as anaphora binding within a local context (sub-DRS).

- If a presupposition is not bound, it is *accommodated* (usually in the top-level DRS).

Presupposition as Anaphora

(1) If a farmer owns a donkey, he feeds it.

(2) If France has a king, the king of France is bald.

(3) # If a farmer doesn't own a donkey, he feeds it.

(4) # If France doesn't have a king, the king of France is bald.

(5) # The farmer feeds it.

(6) The king of France is bald.

Van der Sandt – Basic Principles

Introduce “α-DRSs” as a new type of complex condition

DRS construction proceeds in two steps:

I. The construction rules for definite noun phrases introduce α-DRSs. This yields a “proto-DRS.”

II. In a second step, the α-DRSs are resolved (translation of a proto-DRS into a standard DRS)

Resolution: presuppositions can be either **bound** or **accommodated**

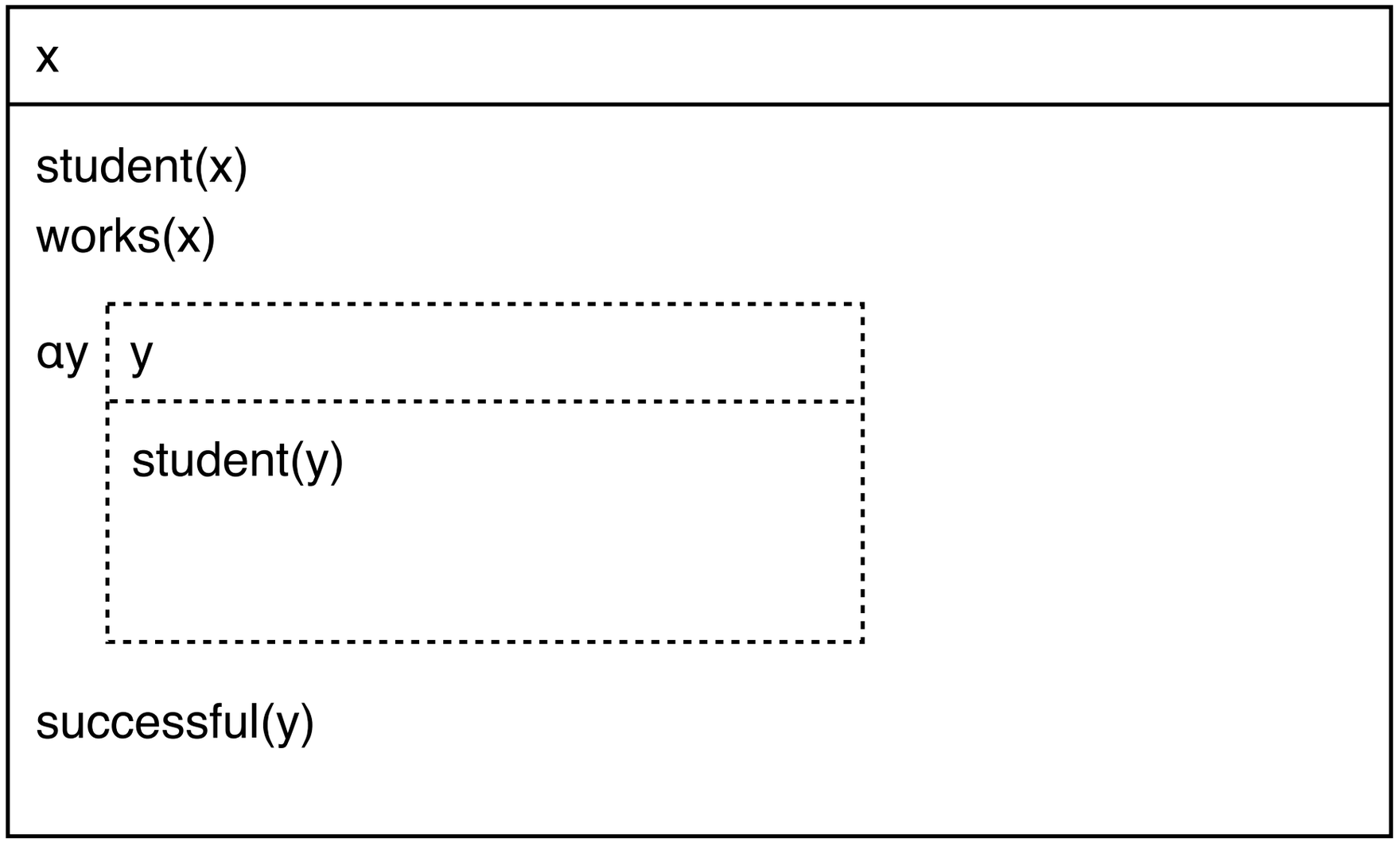
Example – Binding

- *A student works.*

x
student(x) works(x)

Example – Binding

- *A student works. The student is successful.*



Example – Binding

- *A student works. The student is successful.*

Example – Binding

- *A student works. The student is successful.*

x y
student(x) works(x) student(y) x = y successful(y)

Accommodation

Expressions that trigger presuppositions can often be used even if the context does not satisfy the presupposition:

(1) *The king of Buganda is 43*

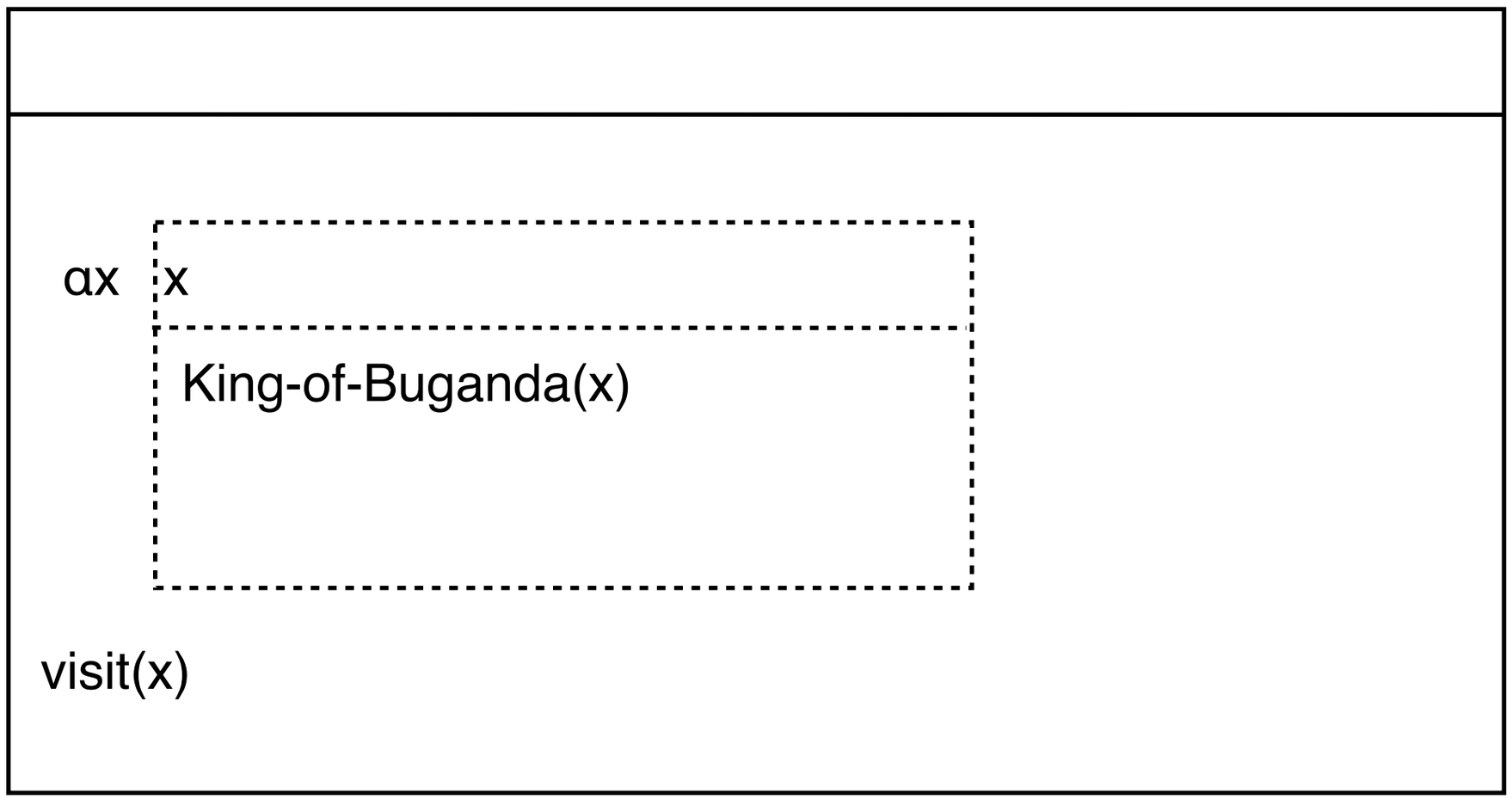
(2) *The movie I saw yesterday was really interesting*

(3) *We regret that we have no free rooms available*

The missing information is silently added to the context as we interpret the sentence: it is *accommodated*

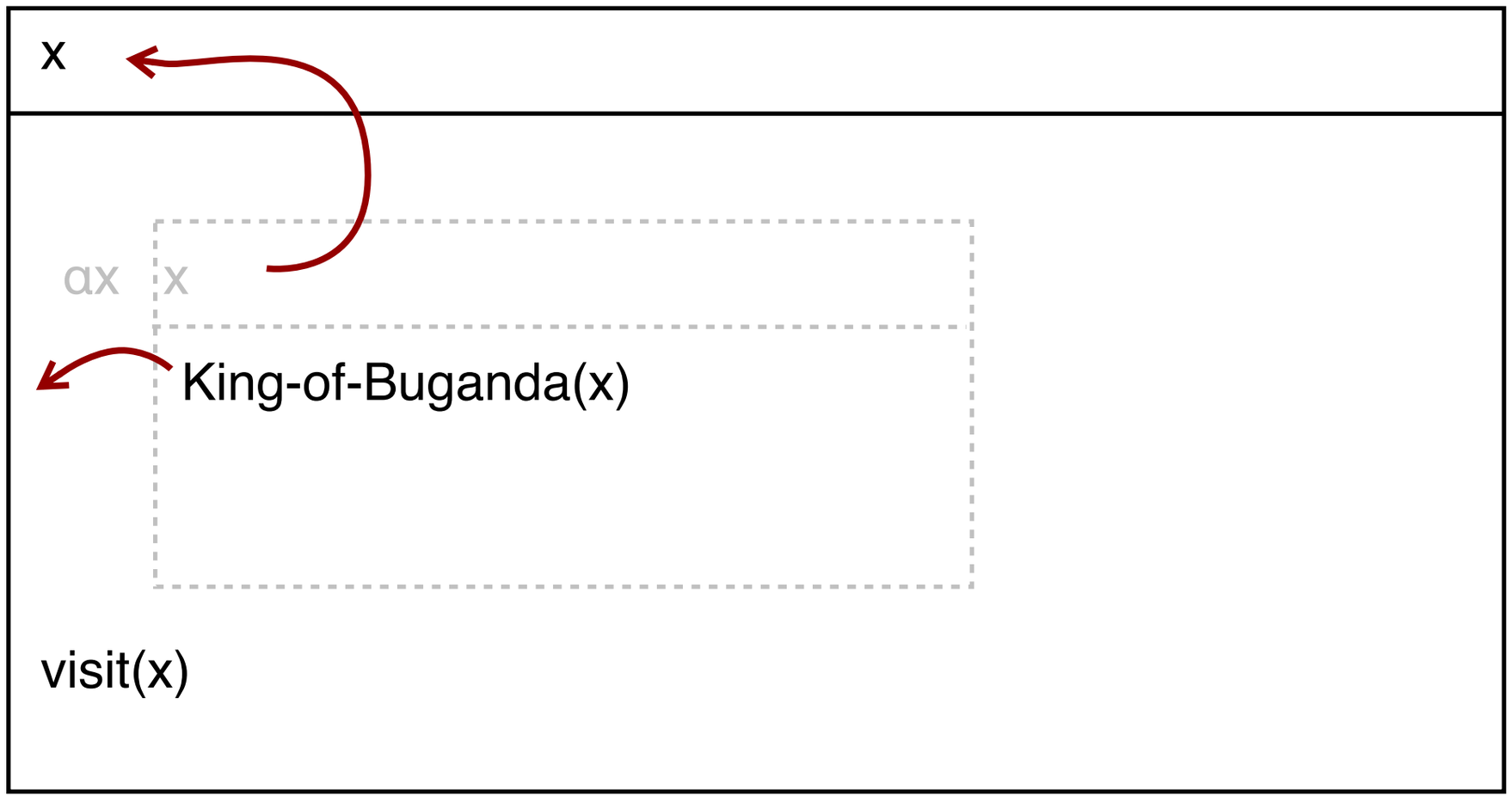
Accommodation

- *The King of Buganda is visiting.*



Accommodation

- *The King of Buganda is visiting.*



Accommodation

- *The King of Buganda is visiting.*

x
King-of-Buganda(x) visit(x)

Syntax for proto-DRSs

A proto-DRS is a triple $\langle U_K, C_K, A_K \rangle$ such that

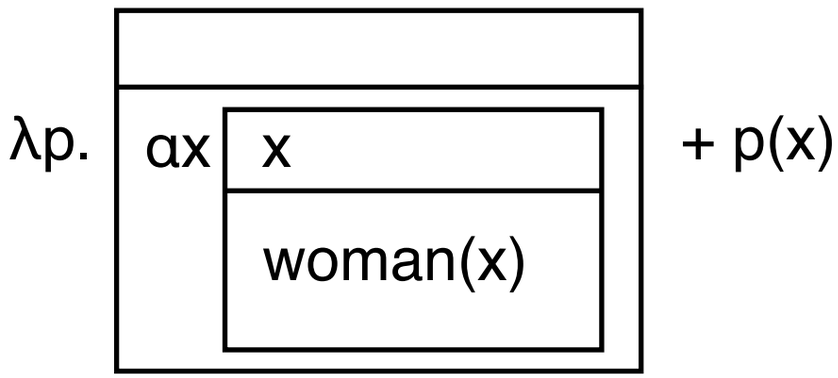
- U_K is a set of discourse referents
- C_K is a set of (atomic or complex) conditions
- A_K is a set of “anaphoric” (α-) DRSs of the form αzK’, where z is a discourse referent and K’ is a proto-DRS.

A DRS is a proto-DRS $\langle U_K, C_K, A_K \rangle$ such that $A_K = \varnothing$

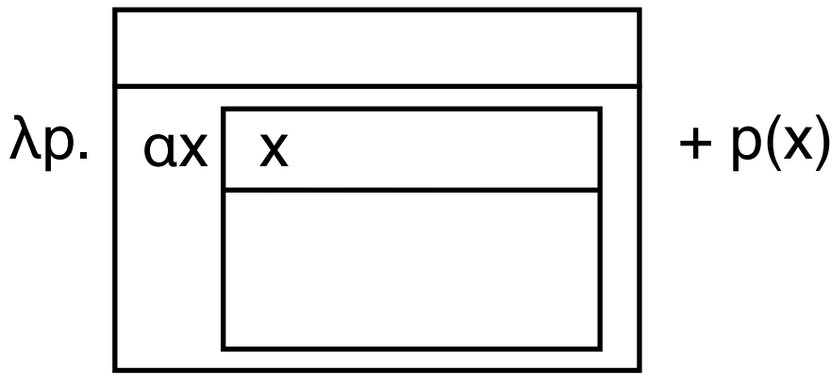
Definite Noun Phrases in DRT

The DRS construction rules for all definite noun phrases introduce α-DRSs:

- Definite descriptions (“the woman”)



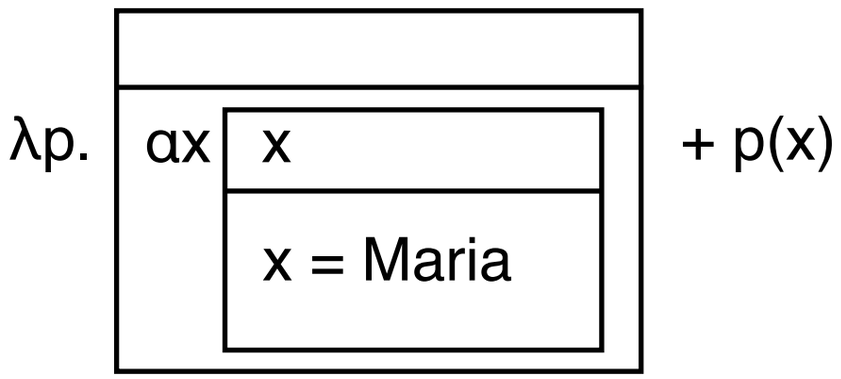
- Pronouns (“he”)



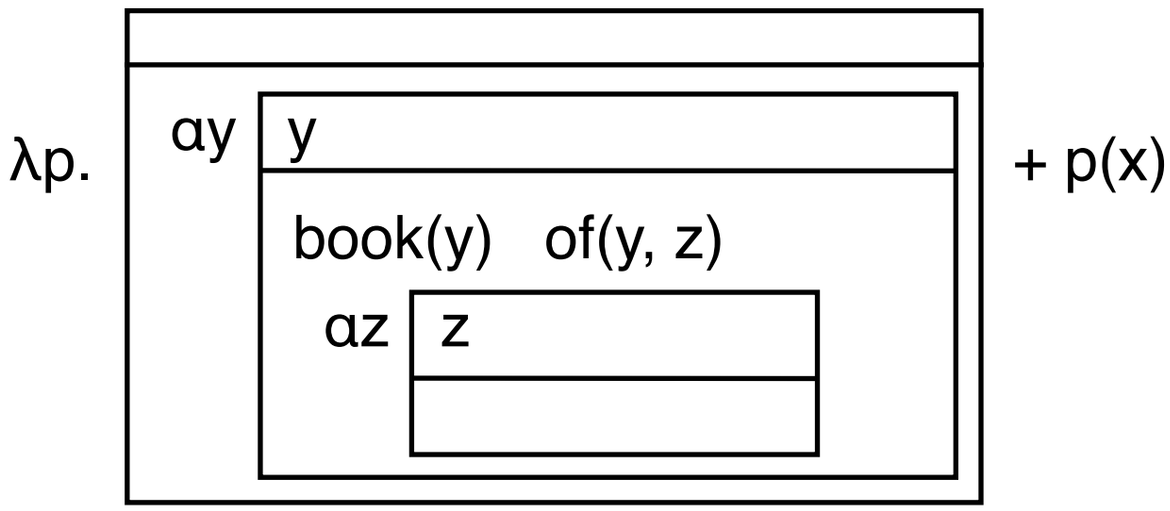
Definite Noun Phrases in DRT (cont.)

The DRS construction rules for all definite noun phrases introduce α-DRSs:

- Proper names (“Maria”)



- Possessives (“his book”)



Back to: DRS Subordination

K_1 is an immediate sub-DRS of a DRS $K=\langle U_K, C_K, A_K\rangle$ iff

- C_K contains a condition of the form $\neg K_1$, $K_1 \Rightarrow K_2$, $K_2 \Rightarrow K_1$, $K_1 \vee K_2$, $K_2 \vee K_1$
- or $\alpha x K_1 \in A_K$

K_1 is a sub-DRS of K (notation: $K_1 \leq K$) iff

- $K_1 = K$ or
- K_1 is an immediate sub-DRS of K or
- there is a DRS K_2 such that $K_1 \leq K_2$ and K_2 is an immediate sub-DRS of K.

K_1 is a proper sub-DRS of K iff $K_1 \leq K$ and $K_1 \neq K$.

Resolution by binding

Let K, K', K_t be some DRSs such that K' ≤ K, K_t ≤ K and

- $\gamma = \alpha x K_s \in K'$, K_s is α-free
- $y \in U_{Kt}$ is a DR that is accessible and suitable for γ

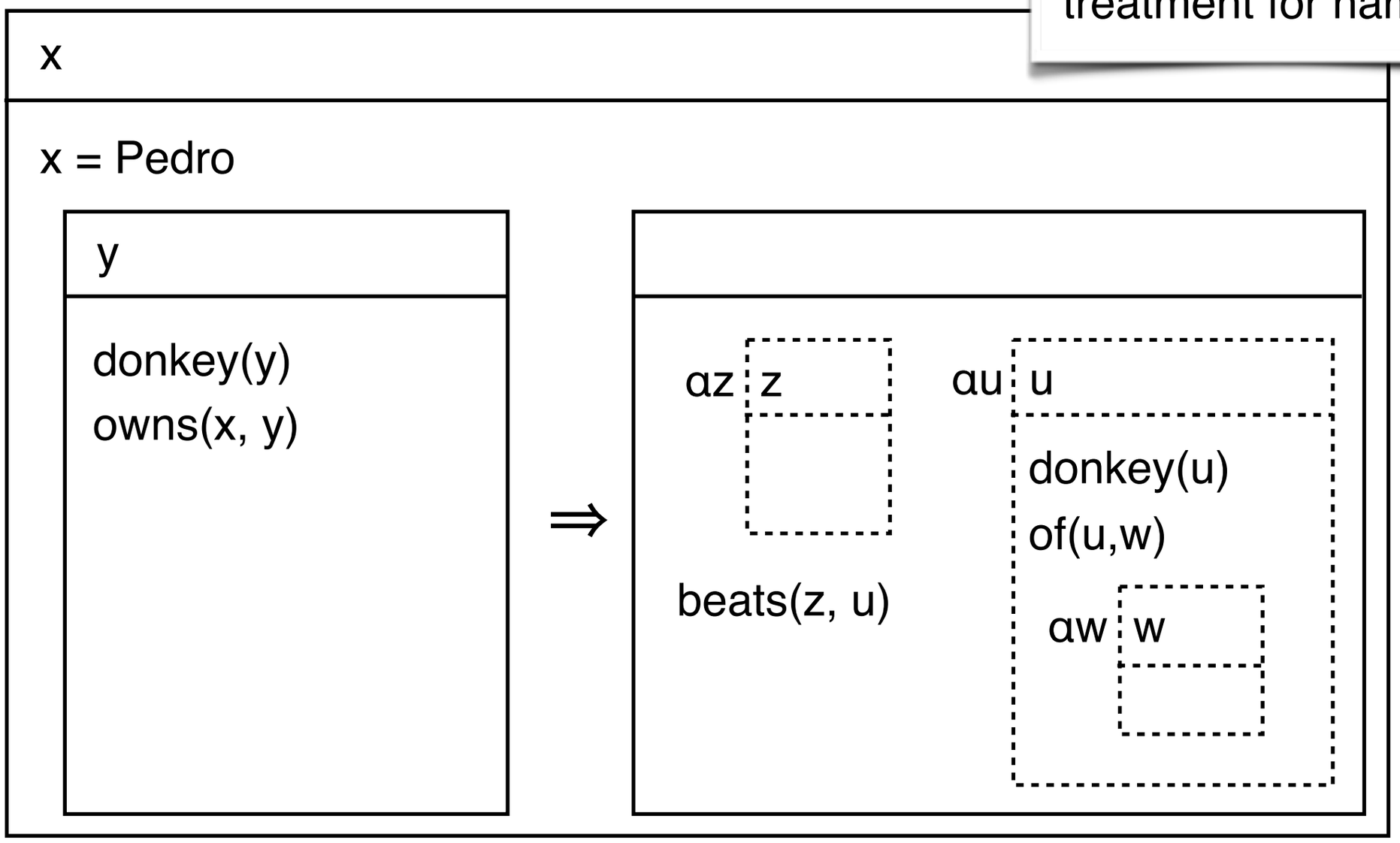
Binding: Remove γ from K' and extend K_t with U_{KS}, C_{KS}, and the condition x = y.

Note: Because K_s must be α-free, complex Alpha-DRSs are always resolved from the inside out.

Resolution by binding: example

- *If Pedro owns a donkey, he beats his donkey.*

NB: we here use the standard DRT treatment for names



Resolution by binding: example

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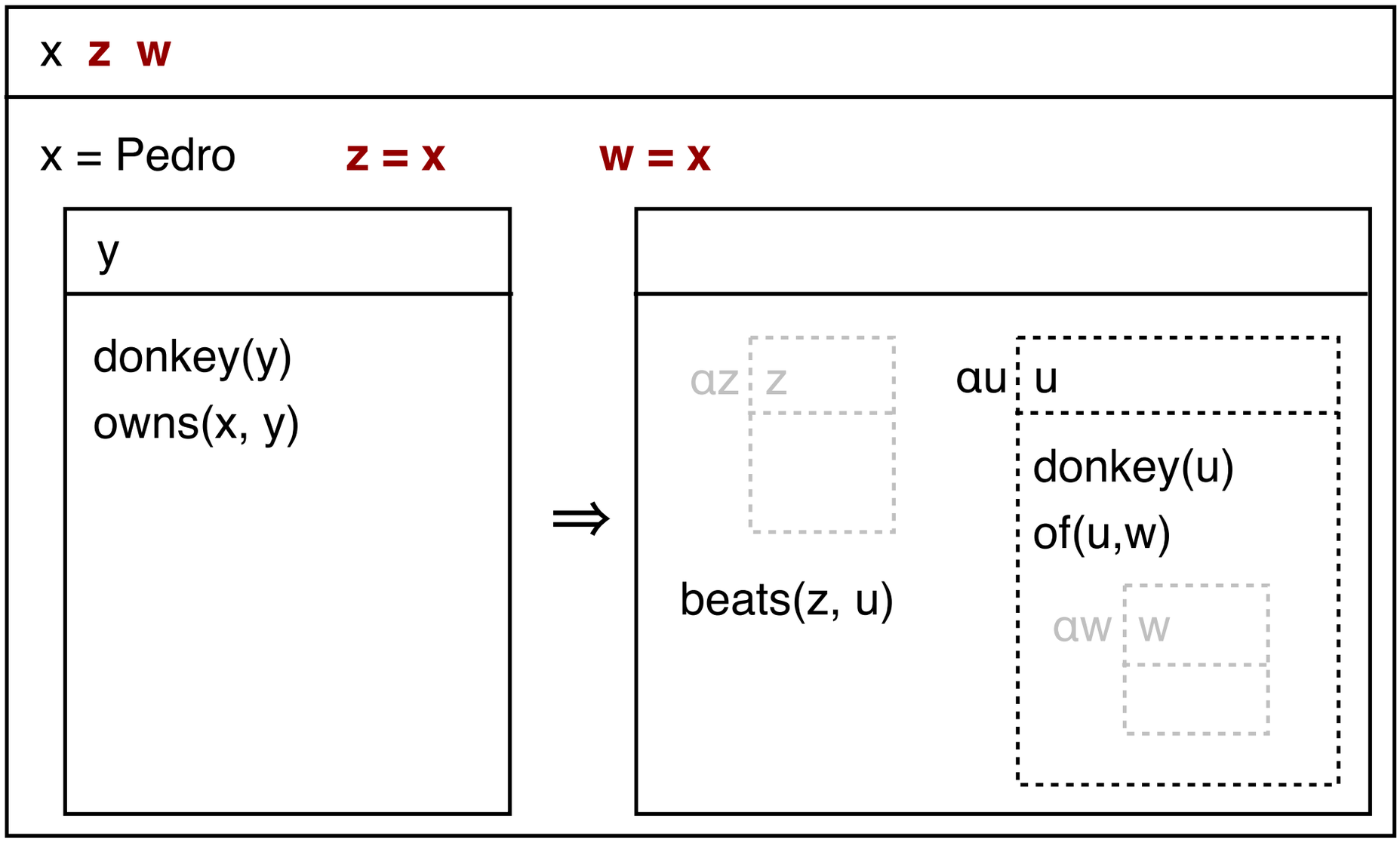

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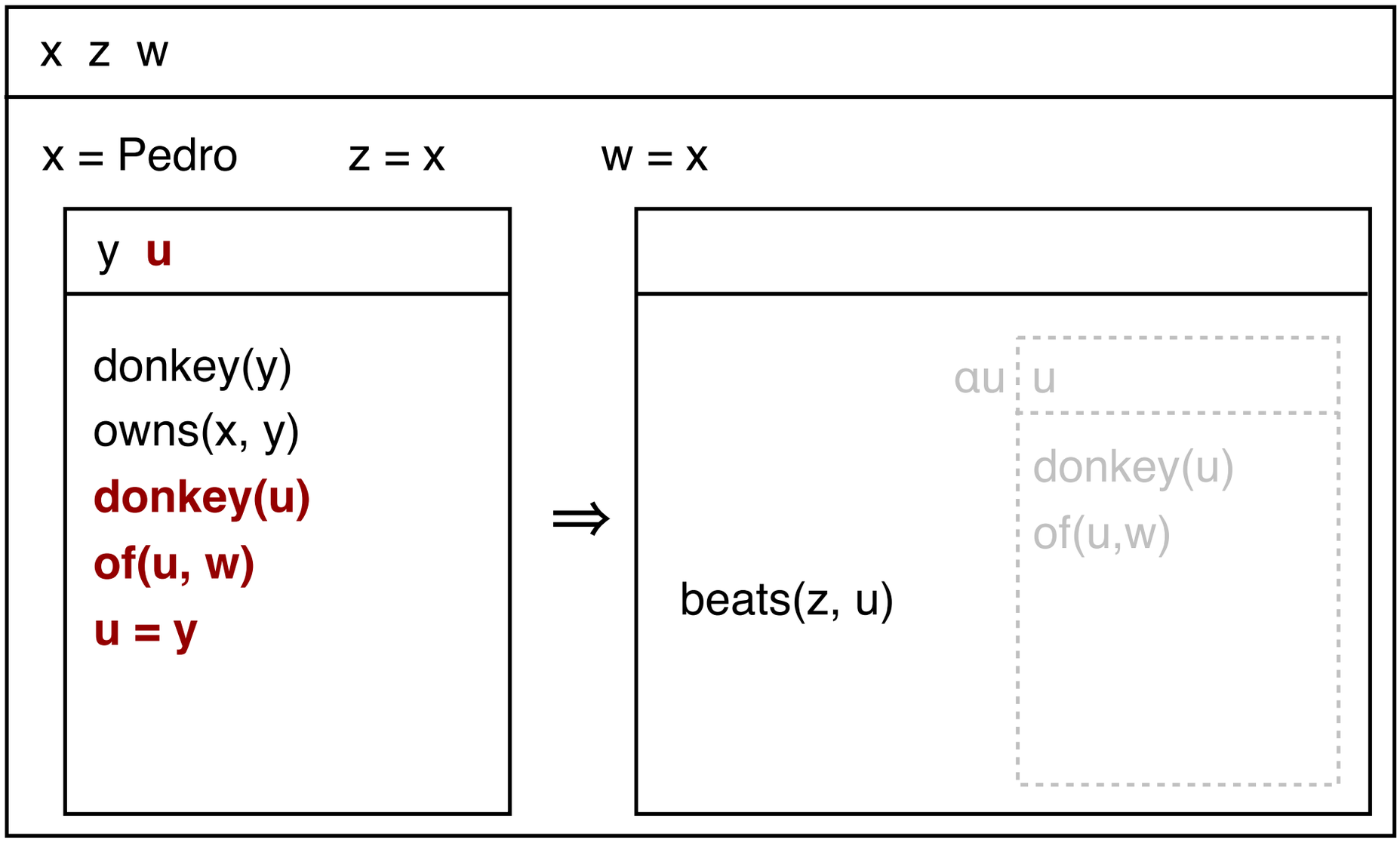

Resolution by binding: example

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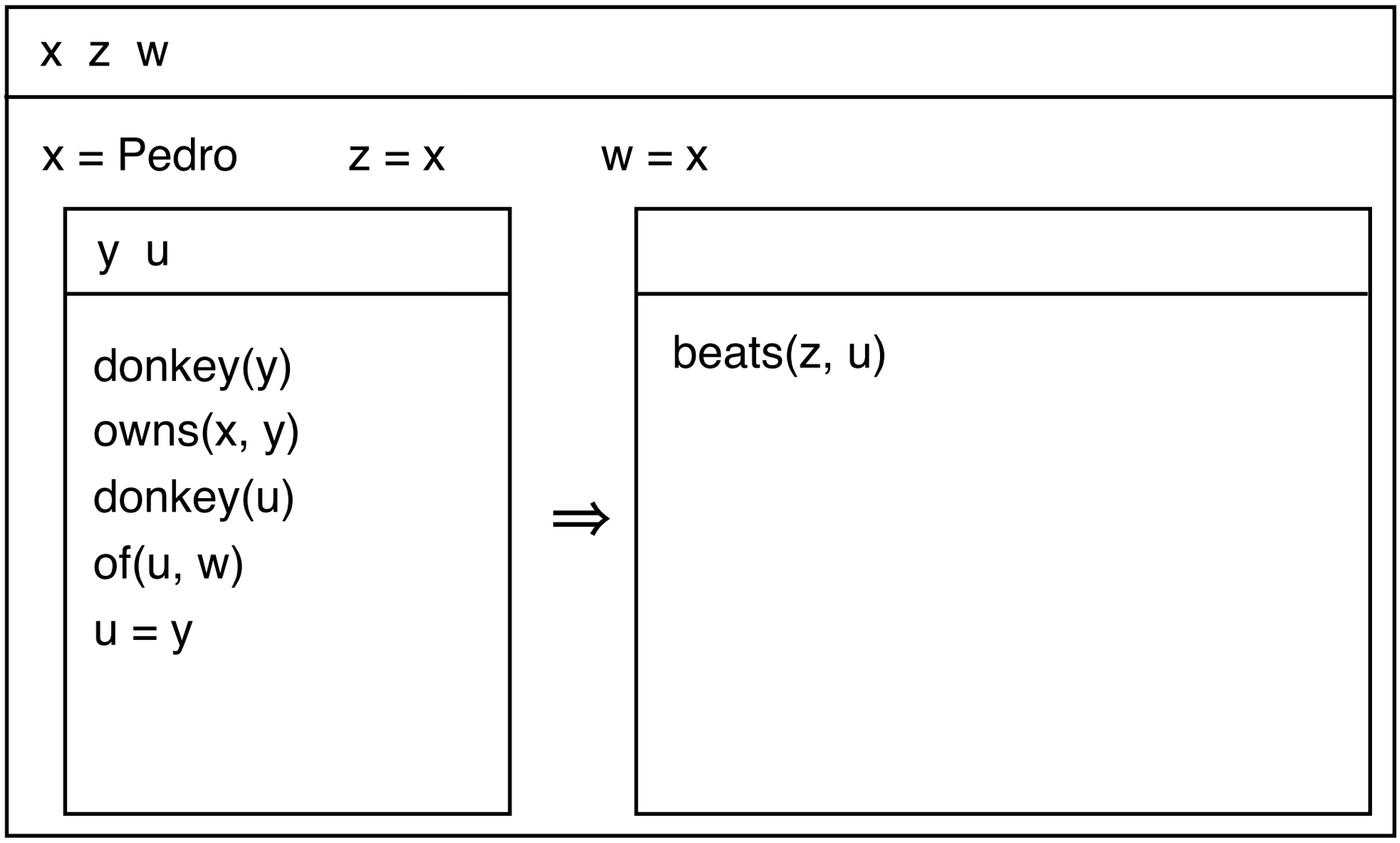


Resolution by accommodation

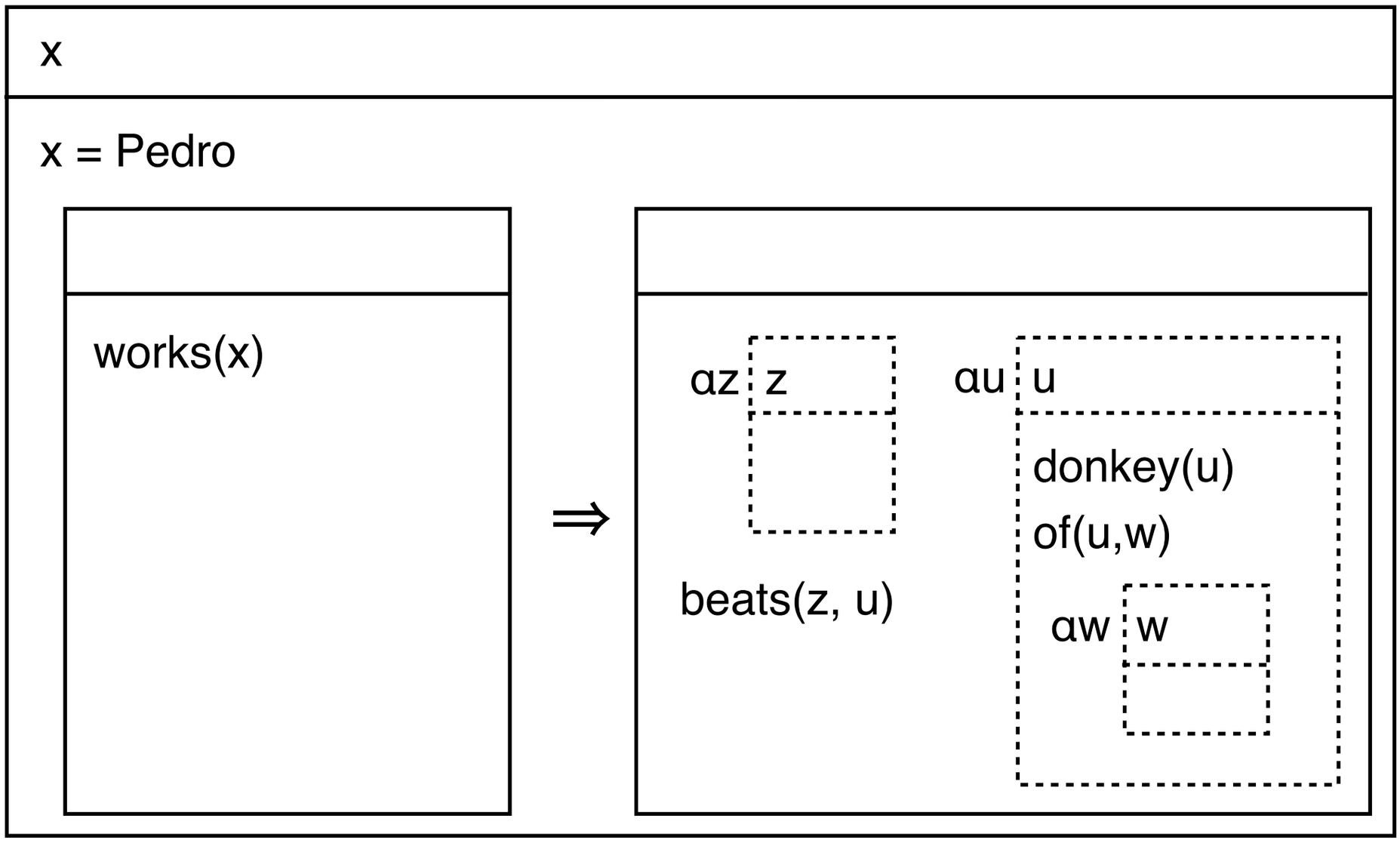
Let K, K’ be DRSs such that K’ ≤ K, K_t ≤ K and

- γ = α:K_s ∈ K’, K_s is α-free
- K_t a DRS that is accessible for γ.

Accommodation: Remove γ from K’ and extend K_t with U_{Ks} and C_{Ks}.

Resolution by accommodation: example

- *If Pedro works, he beats his donkey.*



Resolution by accommodation: example

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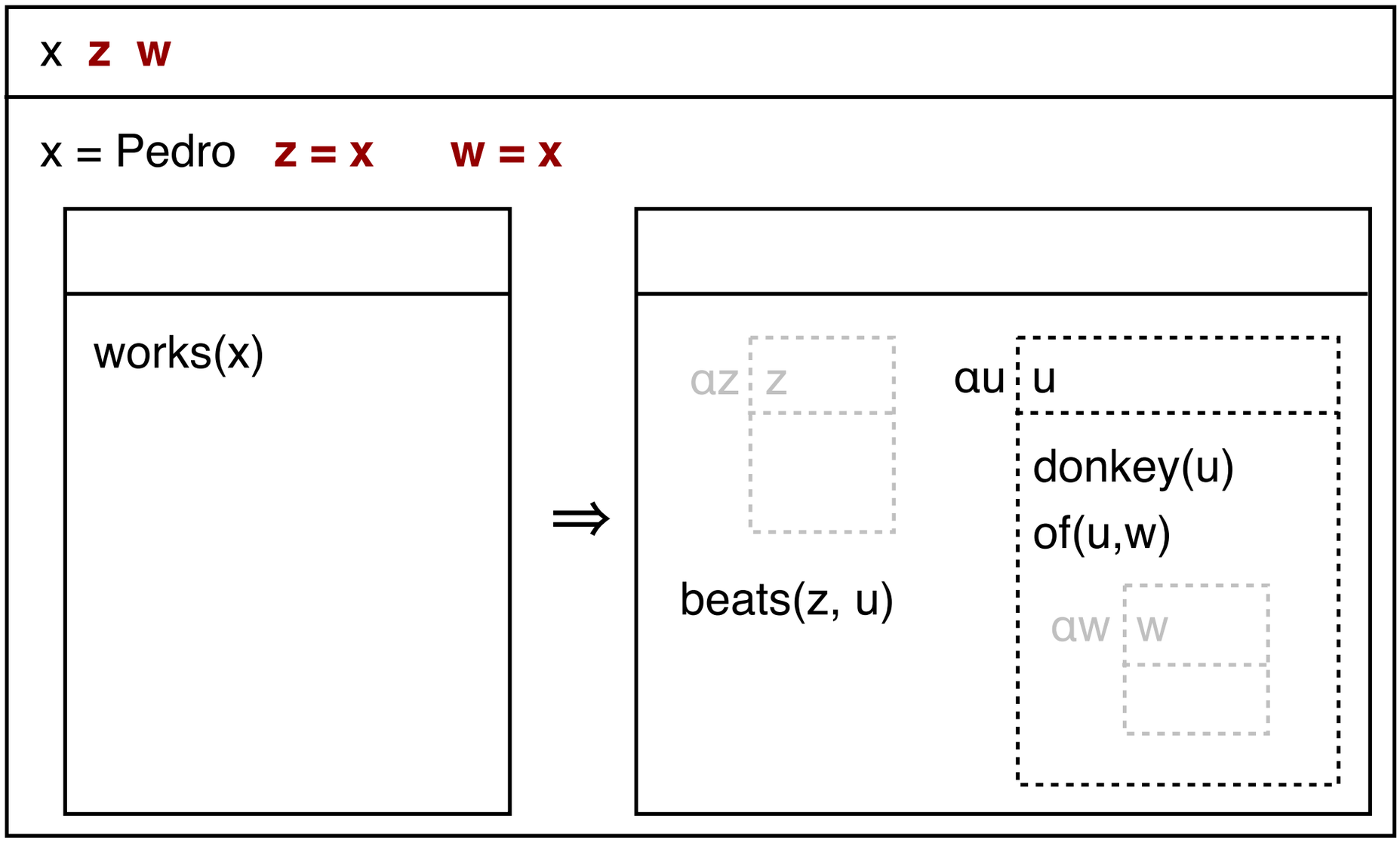

Resolution by accommodation: example

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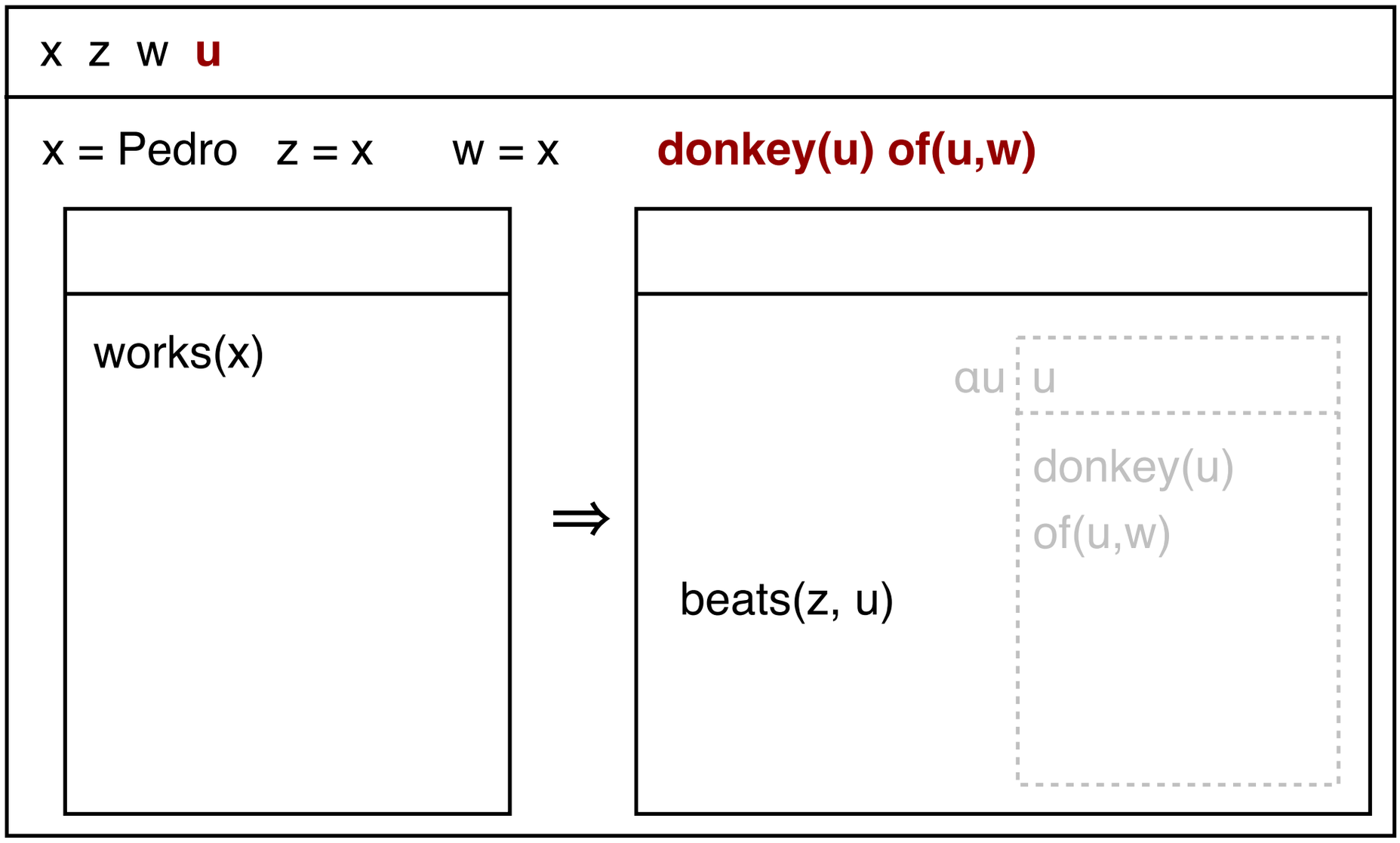


Preference principles for presupposition resolution

- Binding is preferred over accommodation.
- Binding works “upwards” along the accessibility relation: The “closest” possible antecedent is preferred.
- Accommodation works “downwards” along the accessibility relation. It is preferred to accommodate into the highest possible DRS.

Constraints on projection

Free variable constraint:

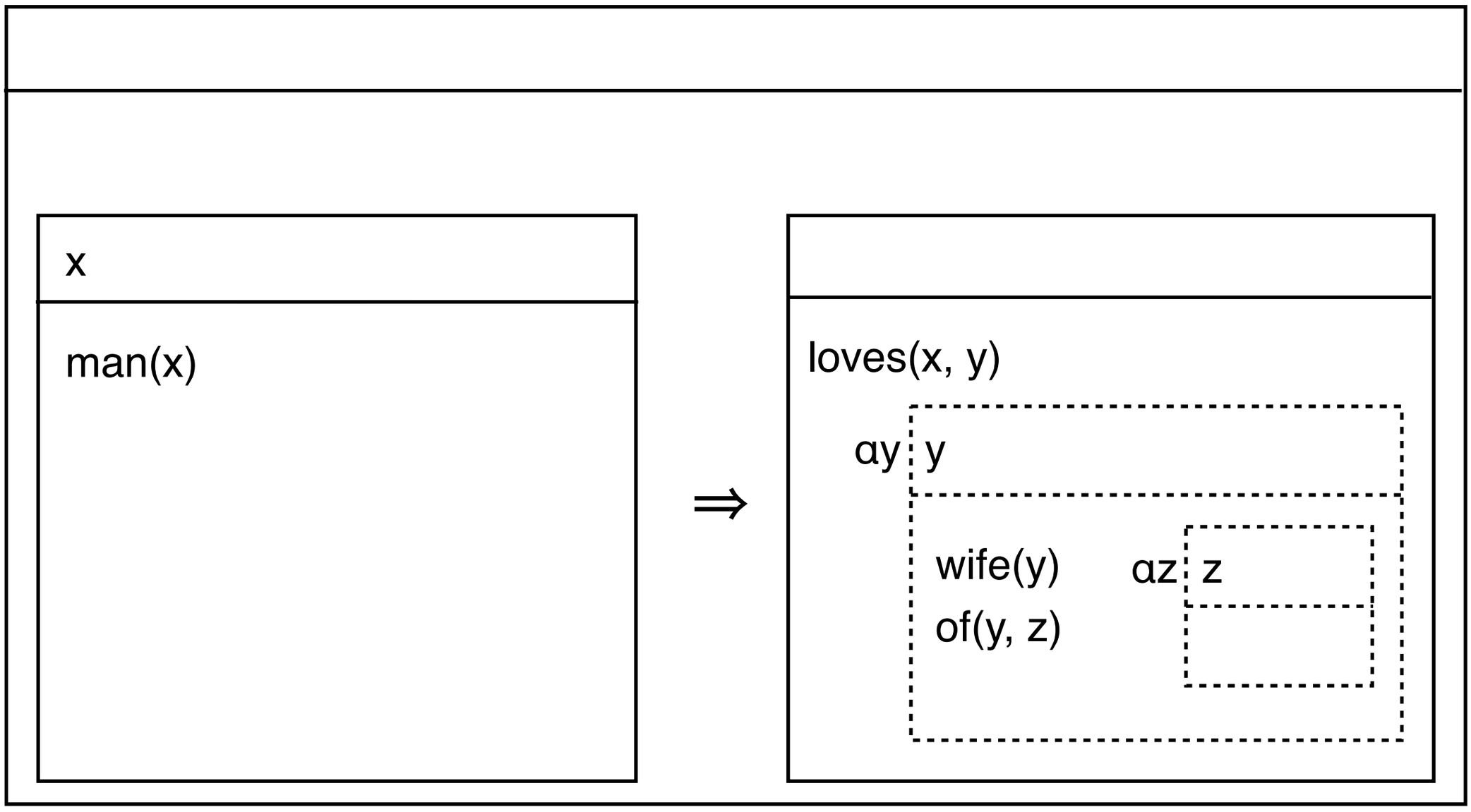
The resolved DRS may not contain any free discourse referents.

Consistency and informativity constraints:

The resolved DRS must be consistent and informative

Free variable constraint: example

- *Every man loves his wife.*



Free variable constraint: example

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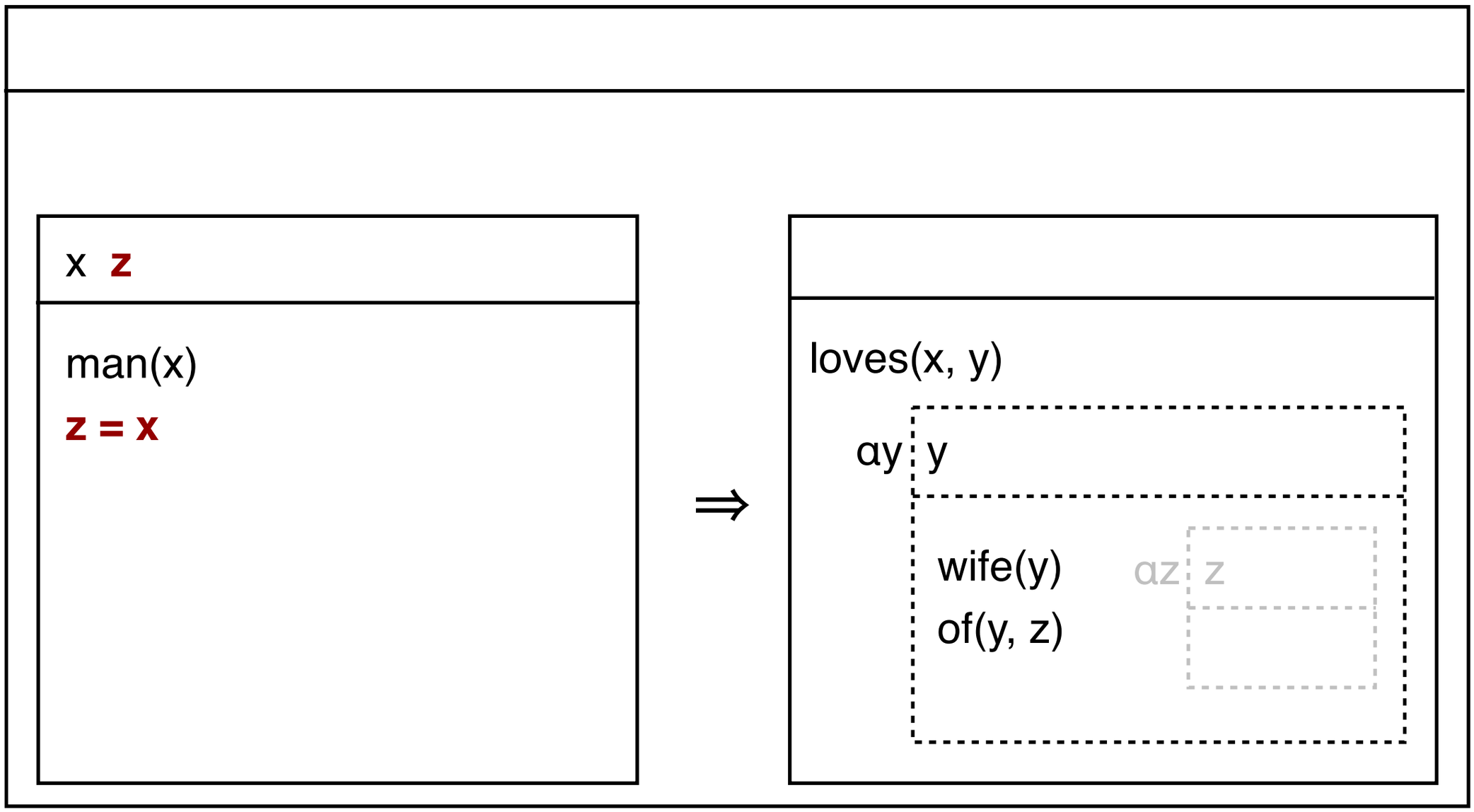

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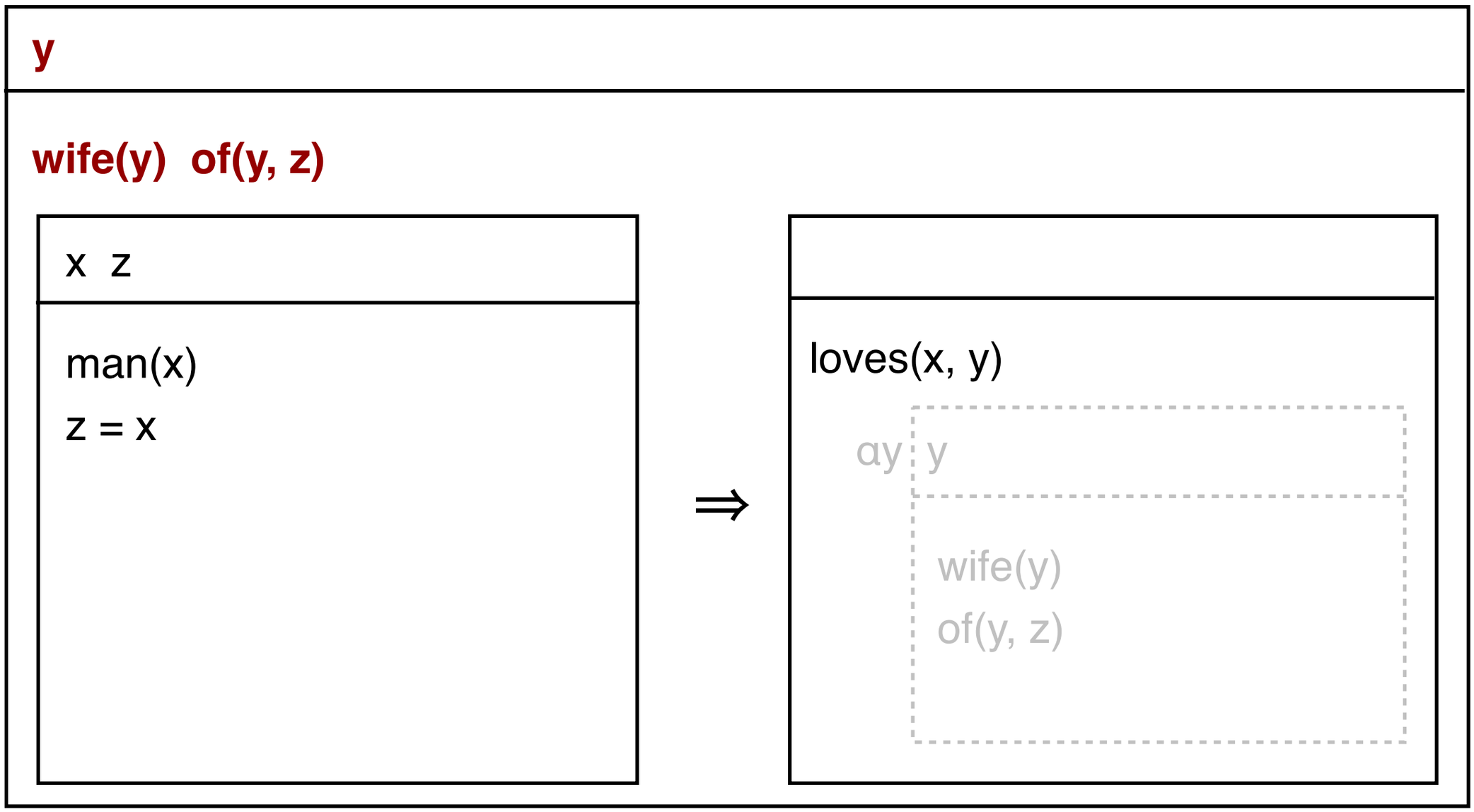

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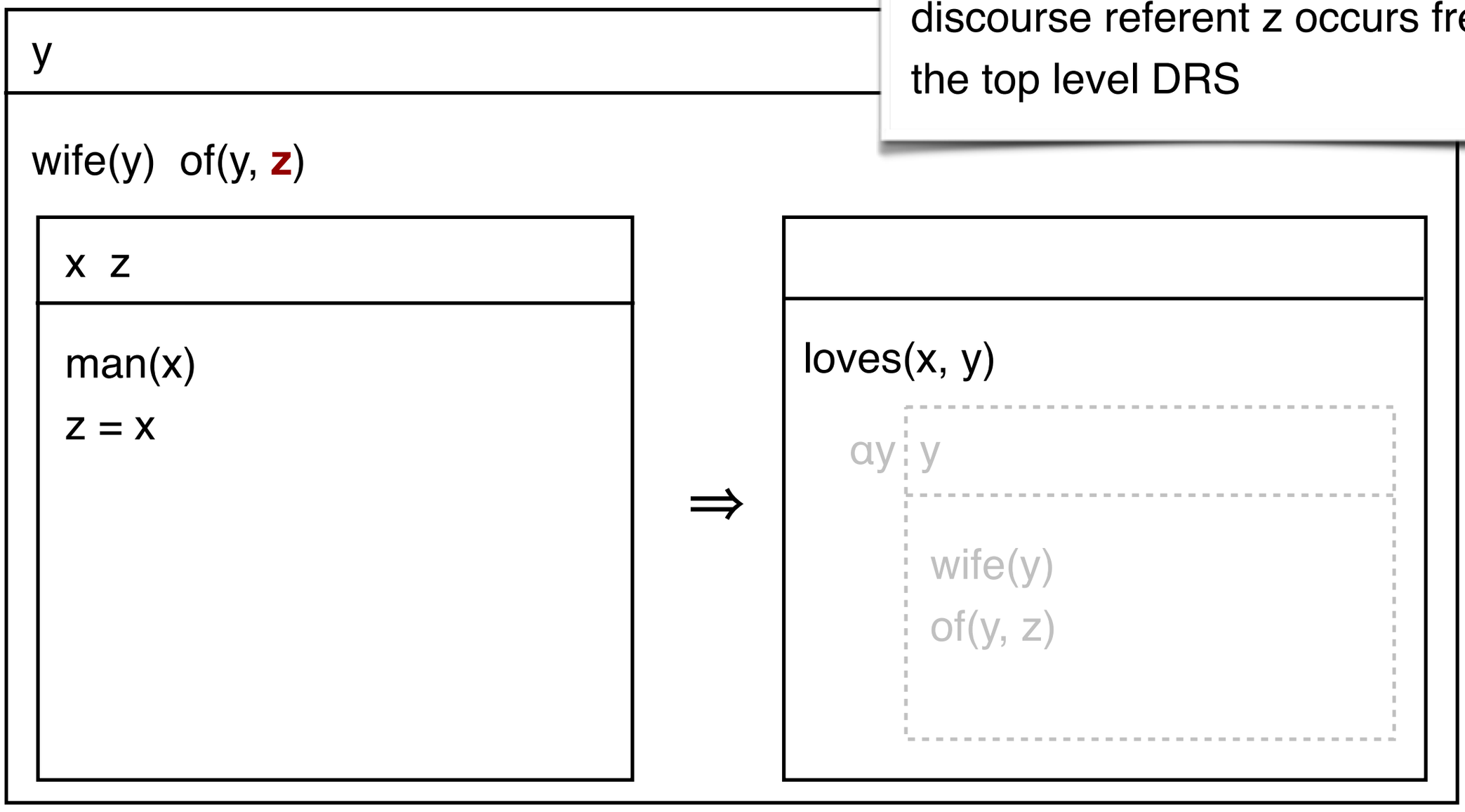
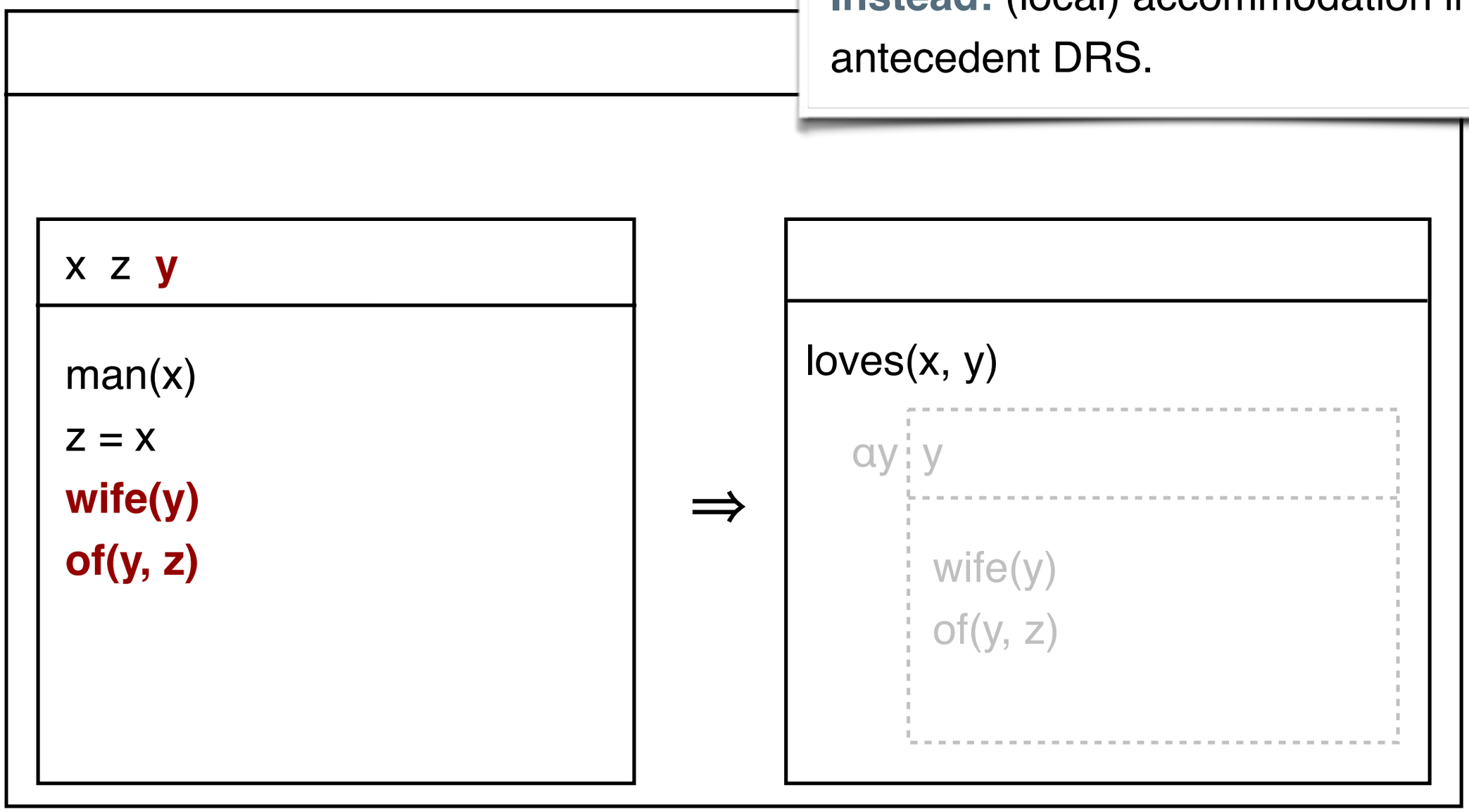


Inadmissible resolution:
discourse referent z occurs free in the top level DRS

Free variable constraint: example

- *Every man loves his wife.*

Instead: (local) accommodation in the antecedent DRS.



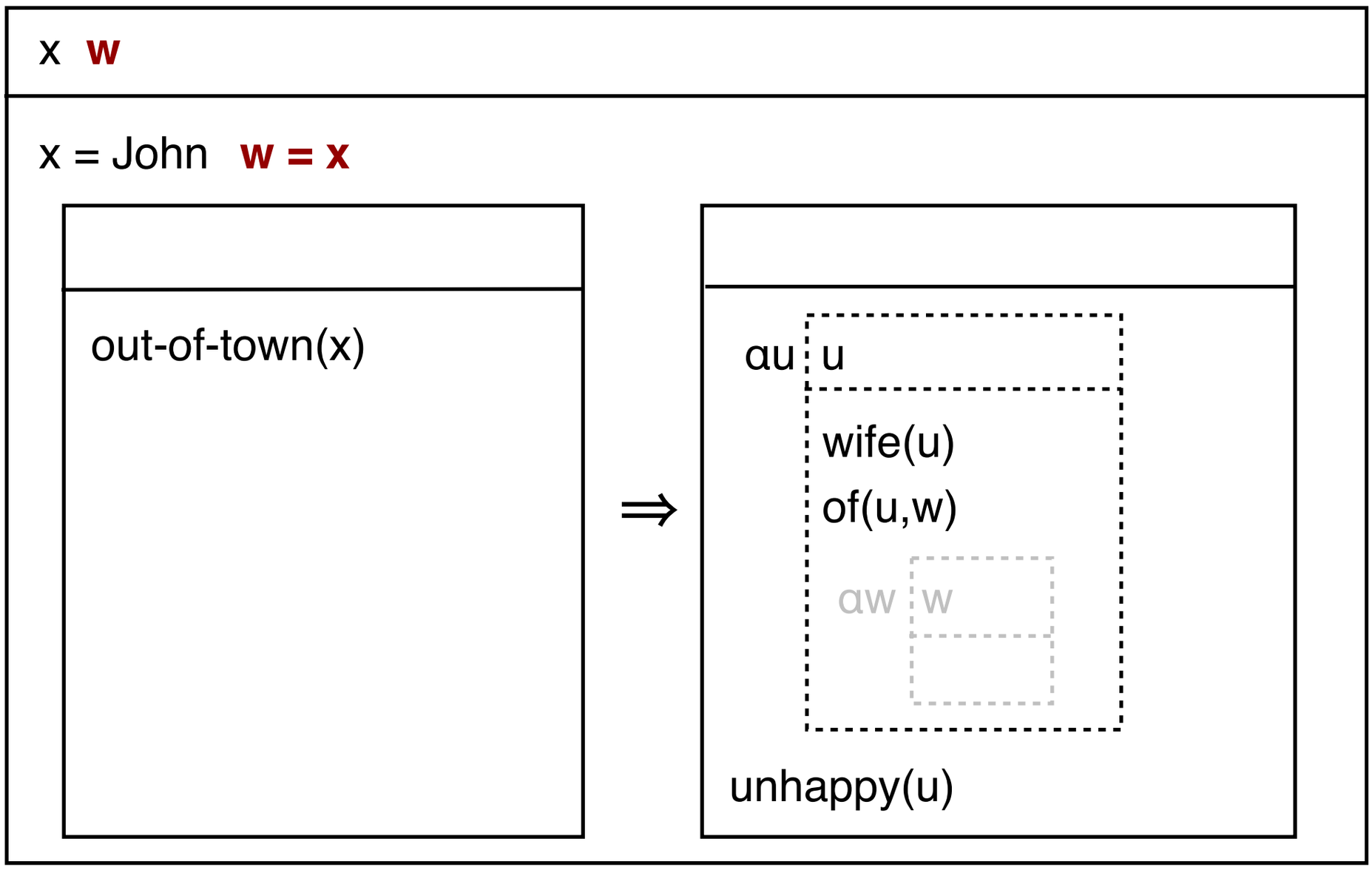
Further constraints on projection

The resolved DRS must be consistent and informative.

- Consistency: The resolved DRS must be satisfiable (taking background knowledge into account).
- Informativity: The resolved DRS may not be entailed by our background knowledge.
- Local consistency: No sub-DRS must be inconsistent with any superordinate DRS.
- Local informativity: No sub-DRS must be entailed by any superordinate DRS.

(Local) Informativity: example

- *If John is out of town, his wife is unhappy.* » John is married



(Local) Informativity: example

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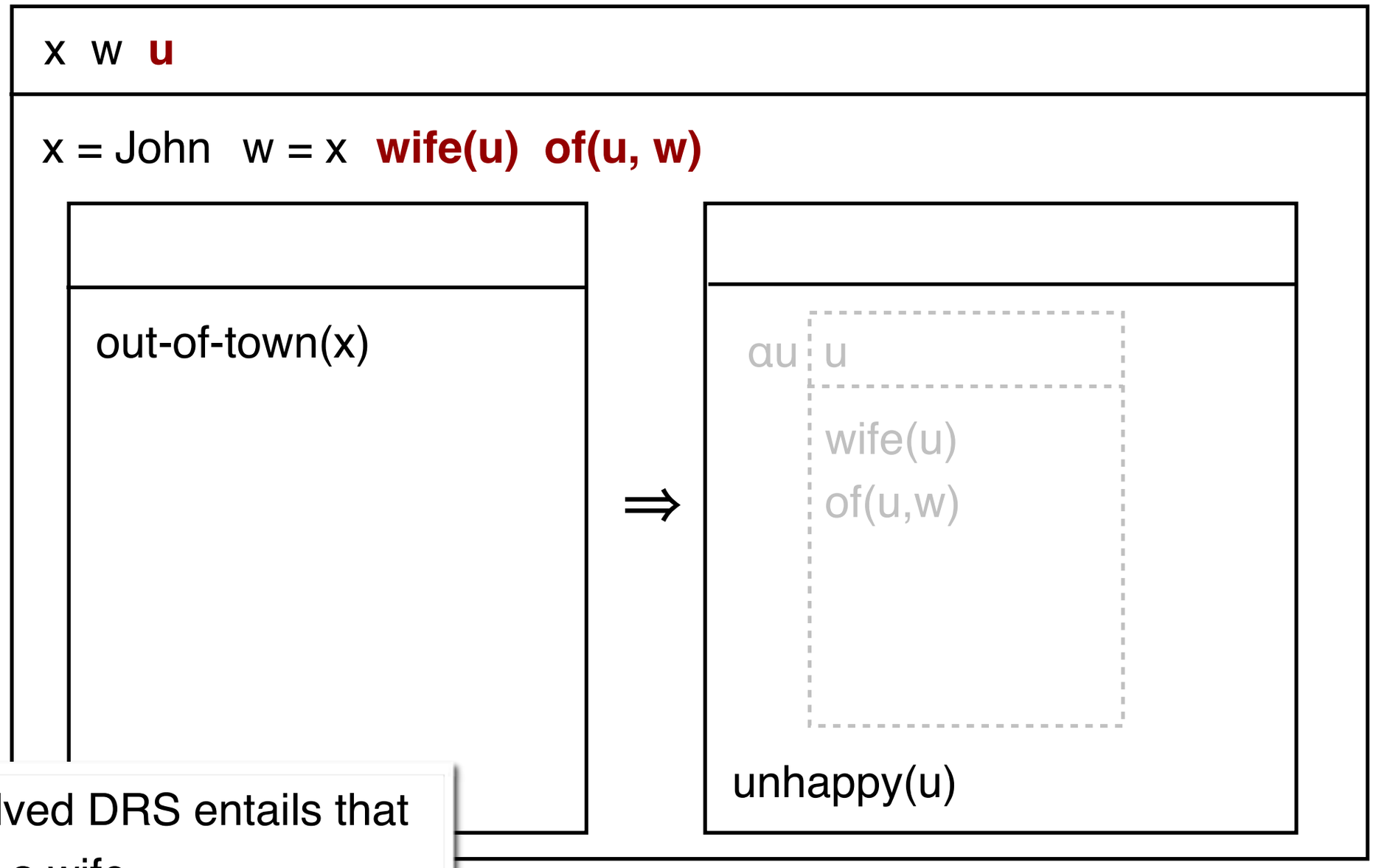
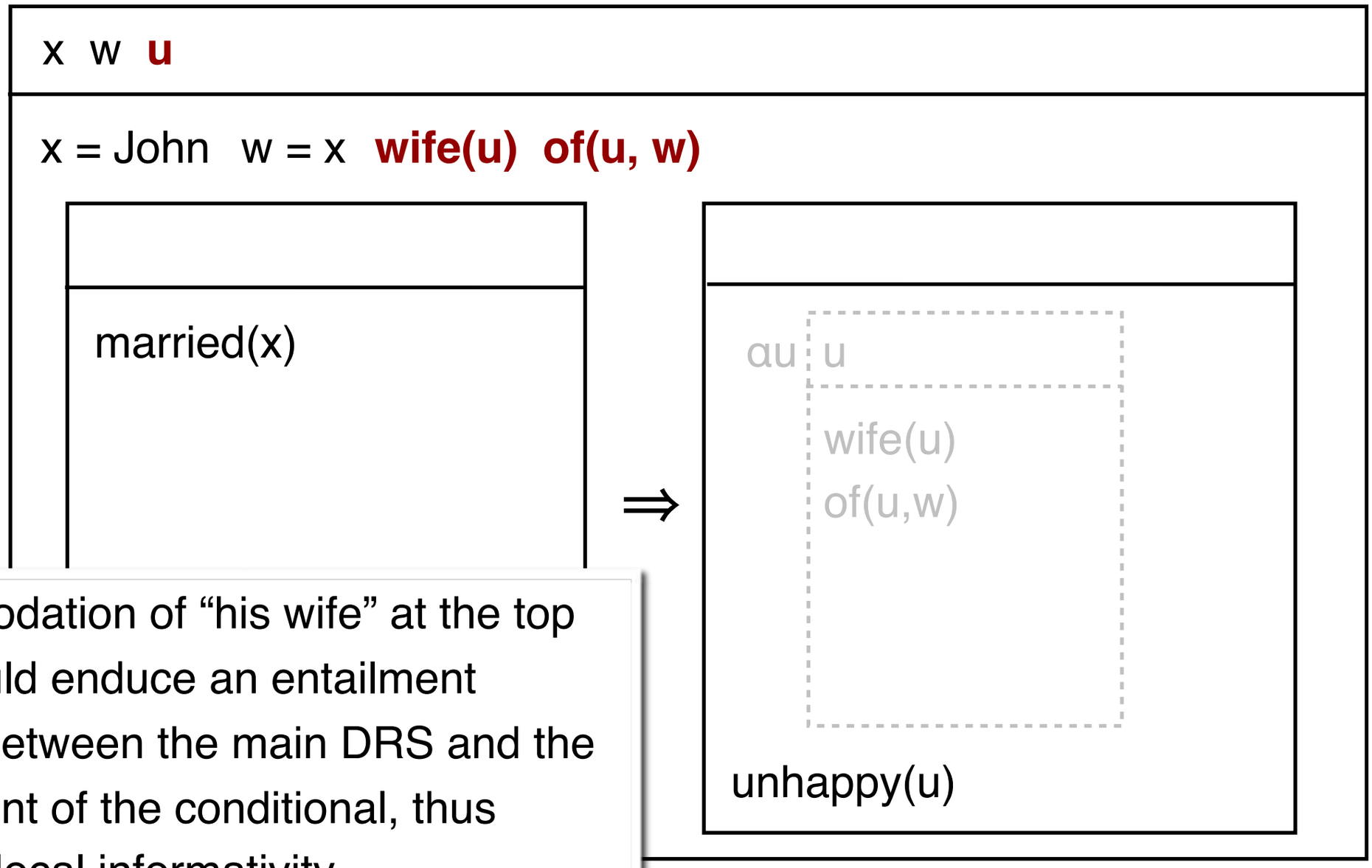


The resolved DRS entails that John has a wife.

(Local) Informativity: example

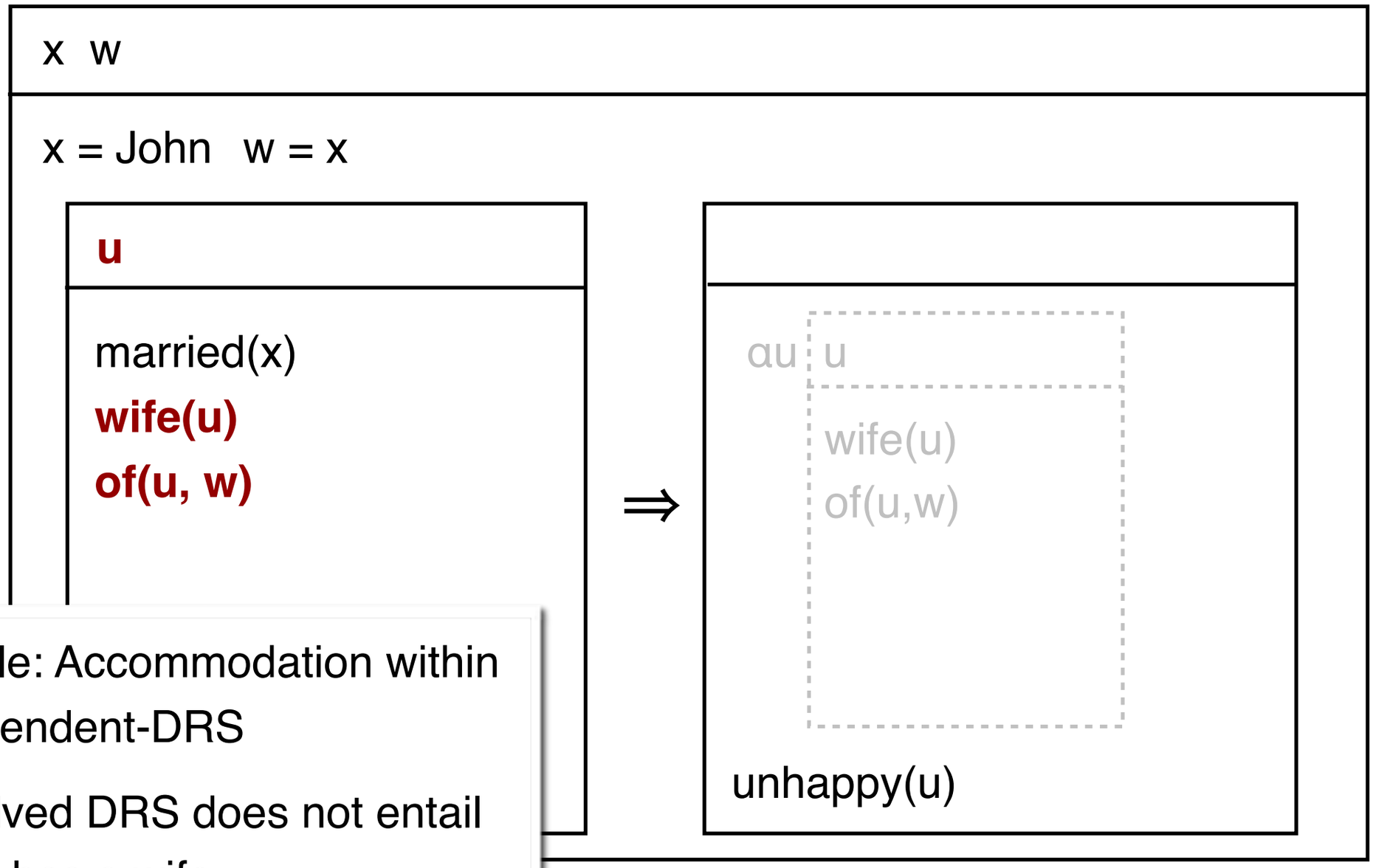
- *If John is married, his wife is unhappy.* ⇏ John is married



Accommodation of “his wife” at the top level would enduce an entailment relation between the main DRS and the antecedent of the conditional, thus violating local informativity.

(Local) Informativity: example

- *If John is married, his wife is unhappy.* ⇏ John is married



Admissible: Accommodation within the antecendent-DRS

The resolved DRS does not entail that John has a wife.

Literature

- Rob van der Sandt (1992). Presupposition Projection as Anaphora Resolution, Journal of Semantics 9: 333–377