ÖSTEN DAHL:

The Genitive and the Subjunctive in Russian

The aim of this paper is to point out a parallel between a nominal and a verbal morphological category in Russian: the genitive case and the subjunctive mood (i.e. -i-forms + by). I shall demonstrate that there is a strong tendency for these categories to be used in the same contexts.¹

This tendency can be formulated as follows: If, in some given syntactic context, the grammar of Russian demands that a noun phrase depending on a verb be in the genitive or allows it to be so it is probable that if we put in a subordinate clause instead of the noun phrase, or if the noun phrase contains a relative clause, these clauses will be in the subjunctive.

I shall now list some examples of this. The following are the cases where a genitive NP corresponds to a that-clause in the subjunctive (i.e. a čtoby-clause):

I. Verbs governing the genitive
   a) “The genitive of aim”
   dobivat’sja ‘attain, endeavour to obtain’:
   On dobilsja lučšich usloviј ‘He managed to obtain better conditions’
   On dobilsja, čtoby emu dali lučšie usloviјa ‘the same’
   želat’ ‘wish’:
   On želaet pokoja ‘He wants peace’
   On želaet, čtoby bylo spokoјno ‘He wants there to be peace’
   prosit’ ‘ask’:
   On prosit proščenija ‘He asks for pardon’
   On prosit, čtoby ego prostili ‘He asks to be pardoned’
   trebovat’ ‘demand’:
   On trebuet otveta ‘He demands an answer’
   On trebuet, čtoby emu otvetili ‘He demands to be answered’
   ždat’ ‘wait, expect’:
   My ždem spasenija ‘We are awaiting rescue’
   My ždem, čtoby nas spasli ‘We are waiting for someone to save us’

¹ The fullest description of the Russian subjunctive is given by Garde (1963). Due credit should also be given to Borras-Christian (1959), where a large part of the facts mentioned in this paper can be found.
b) “The genitive of avoidance”

bojit’ sja ‘fear’:
On boitisa ongja ‘He is afraid of fire’
On boitisa, čtoby kto-nibud’ ego uvidel ‘He is afraid that someone will see him’
stoit’ ‘be worth’:
Ėto stoit našch usili ‘This is worth our labour’
On stoit, čtoby ego pomogli ‘He is worth the help he can get’

II. Direct objects of negated verbs

vidit’ ‘see’:
Ja nikogda ne videl takoj ženščinu ‘I never saw such a woman’
Ja nikogda ne videl, čtoby on ej pomogal ‘I have never seen that he has helped her’
(but in affirmative constructions:
Ja videl takuž ženščinu ‘I have seen such a woman’
Ja videl, čtoby on ej pomogal ‘I saw that he helped her’)
govorit’ ‘say’:
Ja ne govorič čtoby ‘I didn’t say that’
Ja ne govorič, čtoby on ěto sdelal ‘I didn’t say that he did it’
slyšat’ ‘hear’
Ja ne slyšal nikakich novostej ‘I haven’t heard any news’
Ja ne slyšal, čtoby čtoby-nibud’ slučilos ‘I haven’t heard that anything has happened’

Some comments to the above lists: Several of the verbs under (I) allow parallel constructions; e.g. želat’, prosit’, ždat’ may also take the accusative (the genitive is used with abstract nouns), and dobivat’ sja may be followed by a clause in the indicative. It should be pointed out that what we are dealing with here is a tendency.

Subjunctive clauses are also possible after some negated verbs that do not take the accusative when used in affirmative clauses, e.g. verit’. Consequently, these verbs do not take the genitive in negative clauses. It is well known that there is a tendency to use the genitive after negated verbs primarily when the object is indefinite, nonspecific and/or abstract. For example, in the following sentences, knigi would most naturally be interpreted as ‘the books’, whereas knig would mean ‘any books’.

(1) (a) Ja ne čital’ knigi ‘I haven’t read the books’
(b) Ja ne čital’ knig ‘I haven’t read any books’

What is interesting in this connection is that there is a parallel distinction between the indicative and the subjunctive after negative verbs. Consider the sentences

(2) (a) Ivan ne slyšal, čtoby Petr priechal ‘John hasn’t heard that Peter has come’
(b) Ivan ne slyšal, čtoby Petr priechal ‘the same’

If the speaker knows that Peter has in fact come, he will use (a) rather than (b). In other words, if the content of the clause is presupposed, the indicative tends to be used. We can thus make a distinction between “factive” (presupposed) and “non-factive” clauses. Notice that a verb such as znat’, which is only factive, i.e. which always presupposes the truth of the following čto-clause, does not allow the use of the subjunctive. Thus, (3) is ungrammatical:

(3) Ivan ne znal, čtoby Petr priechal ‘Ivan didn’t know that Peter had come’

The parallel between “definiteness” and “factivity” should be fairly obvious. Both are connected with presuppositions: the use of a definite noun phrase presupposes the existence of the referent of the NP, the use of a factive clause presupposes the truth of the clause.

Notice that several of the verbs we have cited with the subjunctive are “verbs of perception”. These verbs behave rather peculiarly with regard to the choice between the genitive and the accusative in negative clauses. It has been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Restan 1960) that they tend to take the genitive even when the object is definite. What is usually not pointed out, however, is that there is a subtle semantic difference between pairs such as

(4) (a) Ja ne vižu mat’ ‘I can’t see Mother’
(b) Ja ne vižu materi ‘the same’

The typical context for (4a) would be something like ‘Please get out of my way; I can’t see Mother’, whereas (4b) could be used in saying something like ‘I can’t see Mother anywhere, probably she has gone’. Thus, the construction ne vidit’ has slightly different senses in the two cases: in (4a), ‘not to be able to perceive because of some obstacle’, and in (4b), ‘not to be able to perceive the existence of’. This difference in sense is also connected with a difference in presuppositions: (4a) seems to presuppose that Mother was really there, which (b) does not. Notice also that only the second sense of ne vidit’ can be specified by an adverb of location denoting the place of the referent of the object NP, e.g.

(5) Ja ne vižu na kuchne materi ‘I can’t see Mother in the kitchen’

Let us now turn to some examples where a genitive NP corresponds to (or contains) a relative clause in the subjunctive:

I. After the verbs that take the “genitive of aim”, the subjunctive can be used in certain relative clauses. Cf.

* A similar explanation is given in Keil (1970).
(6) (a) Ona iskala podrugu, kotoraja ponimala vse ee problemy ‘She was looking for a girl-friend, who understood all her problems’
(b) Ona iskala podrugu, kotoraja by ponimala vse ee problemy ‘She was looking for a girl-friend who understood all her problems’

In (6a), she is looking for a specific person, who she knows understands her.

In (6b), the property of understanding her problems is a demand on the girl-friend. We might say that the content of the relative clause is within the ‘scope’ of the verb isk’at’ in (b) and outside in (a). As is well known, a similar use of the subjunctive is found in French, cf. the classical grammar-book sentence:
(7) Je cherche un guide qui me conduise au village ‘I am looking for a guide who will show me the way to the village’

II. The genitive is used instead of the normal nominative after negated verbs of existence, e.g.
(8) V Sovetskom Sojuze kapitalistov ne suščestvuet. ‘There are no capitalists in the USSR’

(cf. V Sovetskom Sojuze suščestvujut raznye jazyki ‘There are different languages in the Soviet Union’)

If the noun phrase in question contains a relative clause, it will normally be in the subjunctive, e.g.
(9) V Sovetskom Sojuze ne suščestvuet ljud’i, kotorye by vladeli sredstvami proizvodstva ‘In the USSR there are no people who own the means of production’

(cf. V Sovetskom Sojuze suščestvujut ljud’i, kotorye znajut mnogo jazykov ‘In the USSR there are people who know many languages’)

For the above cases we can also find corresponding constructions with čtoby-clauses, namely when the existence of an event is denied:
(10) Ne byvaet, čtoby on ej pomogal ‘It never happens that he helps her’
(cf. Byvaet, čtoby on ej pomogat’ ‘He sometimes helps her’)

We have found a number of cases where the use of the genitive and that of the subjunctive coincide. Can we find any common properties for these cases? Traditional grammar says that the subjunctive is used to express something that is not real. By and large, this is correct. In the discussion above, we noted in one case a distinction between factive and non-factive clauses. Going through our examples, we find that there are hardly any clauses in the subjunctive that are factive. In the same way, the cases we have mentioned with noun phrases in the genitive seem to have the common property that they do not imply or presuppose the existence of what they
denote. Cf. the difference between a verb such as bojat’sja and verbs like kupit’, videt’:
(11) Ivan bojtsja mašin ‘Ivan is afraid of cars’
(12) Ivan kupil mašinu ‘Ivan bought a car’
(12) implies ‘There was a car’, (11) does not. The same difference shows up between affirmative and negative sentences:
(13) Ivan ne kupil mašin ‘Ivan did not buy a car’
(13) does not imply the existence of a car any more than (11) does. Another aspect of the same phenomenon is that the constructions where the genitive is found seem to be almost identical with the ones where there is an ambiguity as to specificity (as in (6a–b)).

I think that the above facts are worth pointing out because a) they show a somewhat unexpected parallel between nominal and verbal morphological categories, b) they demonstrate a fact which is widely acknowledged in traditional grammar but has sometimes been forgotten or ignored by people working in generative grammar, namely that the primary factors underlying such grammatical phenomena as the choice of a certain morphological category are semantic.

Notice that (12) does not presuppose ‘There was a car’, since this would mean that the negation of (12), viz. sent. (13), would also imply ‘There was a car’.

For a treatment of specificity, see Dahl (1970).

REFERENCES
Restan, Per A. (1960): ‘The Objective Case in Negative Clauses in Russian: The Genitive or the Accusative?’, Scando-Slavica, t. VI, 92-112.