

-(으)ㄹ세라

lest, for fear that

Anxiety expressed in a literary register. It is -(으)ㄹ까 봐 lifted into written Korean, and you will meet it in novels far more often than in speech.

HOW TO ATTACH IT

Ends in a vowel	-ㄹ세라	깨다 → 깰세라
Ends in a consonant	-을세라	늦다 → 늦을세라
Ends in ㄹ	nothing added	만들다 → 만들세라
Second clause	a precaution	발소리를 죽였다
Never takes tense	plain stem only	깰을세라 is wrong
Spoken version	-(으)ㄹ까 봐	깰까 봐

WHEN TO USE IT

Vowel stems take -ㄹ세라, consonant stems -을세라, and a ㄹ stem adds nothing: 만들세라.

The first clause names the feared outcome, and the second describes the care taken to avoid it: 아이가 깰세라 발소리를 죽였다 — she muffled her footsteps for fear of waking the child.

Because the second clause is a precaution, it is usually a careful or gentle action — 조심스럽게, 살며시, 죽이다, 감추다.

The register is distinctly literary. In conversation, -(으)ㄹ까 봐 is the form people actually use.

IN USE

- 1 아이가 깰세라 발소리를 죽이고 걸었다.
She walked softly, lest the child wake.
- 2 행여 늦을세라 서둘러 집을 나섰다.
He hurried out for fear of being late.
- 3 눈물을 들킬세라 고개를 돌렸다.
She turned away lest her tears be seen.
- 4 행여 다칠세라 아이의 손을 꼭 잡았다.
He held the child's hand tightly for fear she might be hurt.
- 5 모양이 흐트러질세라 조심스럽게 만들었다.
He shaped it carefully, lest it lose its form.
- 6 비밀이 새어 나갈세라 목소리를 낮추었다.
They lowered their voices for fear the secret would get out.

COMPARED WITH

-(으)ㄹ까 봐

Identical meaning, everyday register. -(으)ㄹ까 봐 is what people say; -(으)ㄹ세라 belongs to narrative prose.

꽤까 봐 조용히 했어요. (speech) / 꽤세라 발소리를 죽였다. (writing)

-지 않도록

-지 않도록 states the purpose plainly and neutrally; -(으)ㄹ세라 adds the emotion of dread.

깨지 않도록 조용히 했다. (so as not to wake) / 깨세라 (in fear of waking)

행여

The adverb 행여 — "by any chance" — is a frequent companion, reinforcing the anxious tone.

행여 늦을세라 / 행여 다칠세라

WATCH OUT

X 아이가 깟을세라 발소리를 죽였다.

O 아이가 깟세라 발소리를 죽였다.

-(으)ㄹ세라 never carries tense. The feared event has not happened.

X 모양이 흐트러질세라 크게 흔들었다.

O 모양이 흐트러질세라 조심스럽게 다루었다.

The second clause has to be a precaution. A careless action contradicts the fear stated.

X 야, 늦을세라 빨리 가자.

O 야, 늦을까 봐 빨리 가자.

-(으)ㄹ세라 is literary. In speech, -(으)ㄹ까 봐 is the natural form.