[How do we know what made-up words mean? (Monday with Mounce 96)](http://www.koinoniablog.net/2011/03/how-do-we-know-what-made-up-words-mean-monday-with-mounce-96.html" \t "_blank)

Posted: 14 Mar 2011 06:54 AM PDT

Someone asked the other day about [αρσενοκοιτης](http://www.greek-dictionary.net/arsenokoit%C4%93s). They asked, “I see the argument that *arsenokoitai* is a made up word and could not possibly mean homosexual. How do we come about knowing what this word really means?”

First of all, all words are made up. God made up a lot at Babel, and humans have been making up words every since. Paul loves to make up words; “God-breathed” in 2 Tim 3:16 is perhaps the most famous. So just because a word is made up doesn’t say anything about whether or not we can know its meaning.

However, when a word is made up, we usually go to its etymology. There are, of course, many issues related to using etymology, but these primarily refer to words that have been in existence for many years and may have evolved from their original meaning. But if I made up the word “blackink,” it would be a fair bet to assume its meaning was ink that was black, at least for now.

BDAG gives this meaning for αρσενοκοιτης. “the association of αρσην and κοιτη Lev 20:13, s. Soph. Lex.: α.= ο μετα αρσενος κοιμωμενος κοιτην γυναικειαν = ‘one who has intercourse w. a man as w. a woman.’” The definition is, ”a male who engages in sexual activity w. a pers. of his own sex.” Lev 20:13a reads, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” (ESV).

Drawing from the passage in Leviticus and its verbal parallels with the etymology of the word, it clearly means “homosexual.” This is its meaning in other passages (see BDAG and especially their bibliography, and the discussion in my commentary on 1 Tim 1:10).

Having said that, there is still the issue of how we translate it. You may have noticed that many newer translations don’t just say “homosexual” but something like “men who practice homosexuality” (ESV, see also NIV, NET, NLT; not HCSB, NASB). The reason for this translation is the distinction between sinful propensities and sinful actions.

When the Bible condemns anger, it doesn’t condemn people who have this weakness and struggle to contain and deal with their anger. It condemns those who do not submit to the power of the Spirit and instead let their anger rage.

I suspect this is the same concern of most translations of αρσενοκοιτης.

*William D. [Bill] Mounce posts about the Greek language, exegesis, and related topics at* *Koinonia. He is the author of numerous books, including the bestselling*[*Basics of Biblical Greek*](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310287681&QueryStringSite=Zondervan)*, and is the general editor for*[*Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words*](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310248781&QueryStringSite=Zondervan)*. He served as the New Testament chair of the English Standard Version Bible translation, and is currently on the*[*Committee for Bible Translation for the NIV*](http://nivbibleupdate.com/?page_id=57)*. Learn more and visit Bill's blog (co-authored with scholar and his father Bob Mounce) at*[*www.billmounce.com*](http://www.billmounce.com/)*.*