Likelihood of external causation and the cross-linguistic variation in lexical causatives

The talk addresses the alternation which involves verbs such as *break* in (1), which can be realised in a sentence both as transitive (1a) and as intransitive (1b).

1  a. Causative: Adam broke the laptop.
   b. Anticausative: The laptop broke.

This alternation is attested in many different languages, but it does not always apply to the same verbs. The question that this observation raises is why some verbs in some languages do not alternate while their counterparts in other languages do. I will show that the property which underlies the variation is the likelihood of external causation. Events described by the alternating verbs are distributed on a scale of increasing likelihood for an external causer to occur. The verbs which alternate in some but not in other languages are those verbs which describe events on the two extremes of the scale. The preference for one alternant is so strong in these verbs that the other alternant rarely occurs, which is why is not attested in some languages. There are two ways in which the likelihood of external causation can be empirically assessed: a) by observing the typological distribution of causative vs. anticausative morphological marking across a wide range of languages and b) by the frequency distribution of transitive vs. intransitive uses of the alternating verbs in a corpus of a single language. I will show that these two measures are correlated. By applying the corpus-based measure, the position on the scale of likelihood of external causation can be determined automatically for a wide range of verbs. I will also present some evidence showing that the corpus-based estimation can be improved by using parallel instead of monolingual corpora.