A Preliminary Investigation into Verbs of Killing.

There are two primary semantic dimensions along which common verbs of killing can readily be organized:

1. Certainty or probability of death
2.Specification of agent

We shall move through verbs of killing from highest probability of death to lowest, examining properties like specification of agent, means, and object as they surface.

*Murder, execute, assassinate, massacre, slay, slaughter, and kill* all directly encode acts of killing and carry 100% probabilities of death without specifying means of death. As one might expect, *kill* is the least specific of all the verbs of killing and is commonly seen with all types of agents, both living and nonliving:

“His wife killed him.”
“The lion killed him.”
and
“The stress killed him.”
“The plane crash killed him.”
but
?“The stress murdered him.”
??“The plane crash executed him.”
??”The tiger crucified him.”

*Kill* is also more frequently reflexive than other verbs of killing:

“He killed himself.”
?”He assassinated himself.”
?”He slaughtered himself.”

*Murder, slay, and slaughter* are each slightly more specific than *kill*, carrying information about the degree of aliveness and intent of the agent. *Murder* carries a high degree of intentionality:

“His wife killed him by accident.”
?”His wife murdered him by accident.”
Relatedly, murder requires a human living agent:

“Malcom murdered Joseph.”
“??”The piranha murdered Joseph.”

The intentionality of slay and slaughter is less clear but seems to lie somewhere between that of kill and that of murder. Slay and slaughter can take both human and nonhuman living agents and objects:

“The man/tiger was slain/slaughtered by the king/lion.”

While kill and murder specify nothing about the means of death, slaughter and slay seem to imply slicing and the use of an instrument.

Execute, assassinate, and massacre specify nothing about the means of death, but instead carry information about the social or political context of the actions they denote and, like murder, imply a human agent with intent:

”He executed/assassinated/massacred them by accident.”
”The lion/plane crash executed/assassinated/massacred them.”

Execute originally meant “carry out”, and now implies killing as an order to be carried out officially:

“The government executed the criminal.”
”I executed the man who stole my wallet.”

Assassinate has evolved from the Arabic word hashshashin, meaning literally “hash-eater”, and referring to any member of a group of Ismaeli sectarians who used to consume hash before executing kings or public officials (often Christian). Assassinate is now most often used with a political leader or some public figure as object:

“I assassinated the king.”
”??”I assassinated my mom.”

Massacre also often carries a political connotation, and refers only to the killing of many:

“The government massacred thousands of people.”
”??”The government massacred him.”

The verbs crucify, behead, hang, asphyxiate, decapitate, and drown all indirectly carry a 100% probability of death by referring to actions that inevitably result in death.
Crucify, behead, and hang all refer to actions that have some social or ritual significance and can only be carried out by a human with intent:

“The king crucified/hanged/beheaded the man.”

“The lion crucified/hanged the man.”

It’s interesting to note that it is easier, but still a bit odd, to imagine a nonhuman living or nonliving agent beheading than crucifying or hanging:

“The lion/plane crash beheaded the man.”

Asphyxiate, decapitate, and drown all refer to actions which can be carried out by a human or nonhuman living agent, but might also be done by some thing or process

“The man/pillow asphyxiated him.”
“The man/accident decapitated him.”
“The man/bricks drowned him.”

I might note here that there seems to be a strong tendency for verbs of killing to surface as verbs of dying, either by passivization without specified agent or by causative alternation. It is very common to see, for example:

“A man was killed.”
“Thousands were massacred.”
“The king ordered the criminal executed.”

etc.

Drown, with suffocate, has been fully morphed by this tendency into a causatively alternating verb:

“He drowned.”
“He suffocated.”

But while drowning always ends in death, suffocating, poisoning, electrocuting, butchering, and strangling only often do. These verbs, like crucify, behead, hang, asphyxiate, decapitate, and drown, refer not to killing itself but to actions that are likely - but not certain - to end in death. These words thus carry medium to high probabilities of death.

Strangle and butcher both refer to actions that are usually performed by human agents:

“She strangled him.”
“The tiger/accident strangled him.”

Butchering, like beheading, is slightly easier to imagine happening by a nonhuman living or a nonliving agent, but still odd:
“She butchered him.”
?“The tiger/accident butchered him.”

*Poison, electrocute, and suffocate* all refer to actions that can happen by a human living agent or a nonliving agent, but never a nonhuman living agent:

“The man/food poisoned him.”
“The man/jolt electrocuted him.”
“The man/lack of oxygen suffocated him”
??”The shark poisoned/electrocuted/suffocated him.”

Verbs of *killing* specify to different degrees the certainty, or probability, of death, the type of agent, the type of object taken and the means of death. Specificity of means varies inversely with probability of death, while object specification only appears when agent is highly specified and probability of death is high. The highest level of evolution and activity seems to appear in this area of high specification and probability.
Sources.