Vowels /i e/ are not contrastive in [±back] in both languages. In Finnish, these vowels are transparent to [±back] harmony (see Ringen 1975). In HM, Alhoniemi (1993: 24) singles out three classes; /i e/ are termed ‘neutral’. Hintervokale /a o u a/ B(ack) (starke) Vordervokale /æ ø y ø/ F(ront)

The following surface patterns arise when a harmonising suffix like -la/æ (CMPR) or a ‘neutral’ suffix like -ge (COM) (there are also rare non-harmonizing B- and F-suffixes that attach to all types of stems) attaches to ...

... a monosyllabic root:

\[ B-la \quad *B-la$e\ F-la \quad *F-la \quad N-la \quad *N-la \]
\[ B-ge \quad F-ge \quad N-ge \]

... a disyllabic root (longer roots do exist, but their behaviour follows automatically from disyllabic patterns; I omit N-suffixes below, since they attach to all types of stems):

\[ BB-la \quad *BB-la$e\ (*BF) \quad *BN-la \quad BN-la$e\ (*FB) \quad *FF-la \quad FF-la \quad *FN-la \quad FN-la \quad (*NB) \quad *NF-la \quad NF-la \quad *NN-la \quad NN-la \]

B-vowels, i.e. [+back], are not found next to F-vowels, i.e. [−back], and also after N-vowels both root-externally (except for sporadic NB examples like šišk$aš$) and across morpheme borders. Thus, N-vowels are not neutral.

The HM data can be described using the Search Principle (Nevins 2010). Within this system, /i/ and /e/ are not (a) blocking (there is no morphological or subsegmental property to licence that; cf. harmonic blockers in other approaches, hardly neutral). Whether /i/ and /e/ are (b) transparent is not straightforward: while Finnish relies on contrastive [±back] values and excludes /i e/, HM noncontrastive vowels seem to provide a [−back] value.

HM presents a case of ambiguity:

1) [±back] harmony might be syllable-bound in HM, looking only at the next syllable to the left (then N-vowels can be transparent, the search fails, and the default [−back] is chosen);

2) unlike Finnish and other Uralic languages, the search might be relativised to all values of [±back] including those of /i e/.

Synchronic HM data doesn’t seem to provide a solution (not yet?), but the answer might be in the development of HM (and the demise of Meadow Mari) harmony.

Approaches that rely on the Contrastivist Hypothesis (Dresher 2009; Hall 2018 on Finnish and Votic) might have difficulties accounting for the HM data given that there’s also a recent process of /t/ palatalization to /ʃt/ (Bradley 2014: 48) before F- and N-vowels indicating that the latter are [−back].